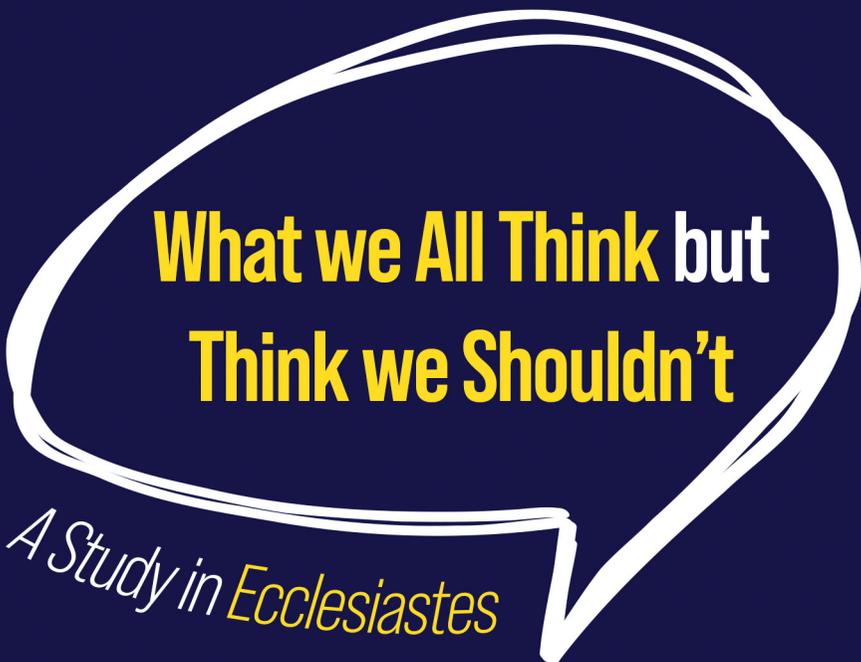


ASKING FOR A FRIEND



What we All Think but
Think we Shouldn't

A Study in Ecclesiastes

Bill Mesaeh, Jr

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*To Hannah: time and again, you have made
Ecclesiastes 9:9 my calm in the storm. 314.*

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INTRODUCTION.

Permission to be Honest

The longer I'm in ministry, the more I'm convinced we all have the same fears, questions, and insecurities. And we all assume we're the only ones who could possibly be thinking those things. There's been plenty of things I've pondered and wanted resolution on but was afraid to ask out of fear people would think I'm a heretic or an idiot.

In a not-too-distant season of my life that was particularly difficult (which is a nice way to say I was depressed and hated everything), I read Ecclesiastes and immediately hated it.

But I read it again. And again. Suddenly, I realized Solomon had many of the same thoughts I had—the thoughts I was convinced nobody would understand or be

able to relate to. Incidentally, they're the same thoughts I've heard countless times from people I've been able to minister to over the years.

If any of this resonates so far, may I suggest you spend some time in Ecclesiastes. Perhaps this small work can serve as a guide. Each chapter wrestles with a different question addressed by Solomon. I believe you'll find many of the questions familiar. I'm equally confident you'll find Solomon's conclusions to be honest, to the point, and seasoned with wisdom.¹

Perhaps that's what I love so much about this book (Solomon's, not mine): the author is honest enough to "call it like he sees it" without worrying about whether his viewpoints fit into predictable categories or reinforce popularly held convictions. I found all this honesty sobering at first, but that quickly gave way to something I didn't expect: hope.

I pray you find the same.

¹ In addition to a few key books I'll cite in the bibliography, I also found three sermon series through Ecclesiastes to be encouraging and insightful. Hearing three Bible teachers come to strikingly similar conclusions—despite the myriad ways these three men differ from one another—was an added comfort. I'll provide links to each series in the bibliography. I am indebted to the fruits of their labor and wish to claim no credit that is not mine to claim.



CHAPTER 1.

Is there Life Before Death?

Ecclesiastes 1:1 (NLT)

¹ These are the words of the Teacher, King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem.

Solomon was quite an impressive figure. We'll explore his biography in detail as we walk through the book, so for now, we'll just say he was incredibly rich, smart, and powerful. He wrote 3 books in the Bible (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon). He comes from a crooked family as the product of adultery and murder. So, he's a guy we can—at times—relate to, and—at other times—aspire to be like.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 (NLT)

² "Everything is meaningless," says the Teacher, "completely meaningless!" ³ What do people get for all their hard work under the sun?

EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS

At the sound of the bell, Solomon comes out swinging. He doesn't warm up or dance around. "Hi. I'm Solomon. Thank you for reading my book. For my first point, I'd like to tell you, 'There is no point.'"

If you've ever thought, "life is hard," Solomon is here to say, "Yes. Actually, it's harder than you think. But only until you die."

Depending on your translation, the word he'll come to use almost 40 times is probably either 'vanity' or 'meaningless'. Either way, it refers to a mist, vapor, or smoke that only eludes efforts to grab it. Vanity is the opposite of the term he uses in the very next verse.

"Profit" refers to what's left over. This is the part you can put in your pocket and walk away with at the end of the day. Is there any profit to all of this? In other words: is there a point to my life? Because it often feels like there's no point.

Solomon says, "I look at that sun up there and see it staring back at me. It doesn't matter how hard I work to pile up enough nuts for winter, it's never enough."

He'll return to these 3 key terms (so, we will too) again and again: Vanity, Profit, and Under the Sun.

For now, he's just saying out loud what everybody, everywhere is thinking: Life is hard. It's frustrating. Life is messy.

The crucial question, then, is: Is there life *before* death?

Even if you've accepted the idea of life *after* death (Heaven, etc.), we're not there yet. For now, we're here on earth dealing with the mess and frustration inherent to our existence.

So, whether you're a faithful believer or not, I think we'd all like to know: What about until then? What about now? Regardless of whether there's anything good to be found down here, we can all agree that there's plenty of bad. And hard. And sad. And frustrating.

This should come as no surprise. Our environment is *designed* (that word is intentional) to work against us. It's self-evident regardless of your worldview: as soon as you stop eating right and exercising, you get fat. The minute you're born, you start to die. Drink bottled water. Wear your seat belt. Take vitamins.

Still, you're going to die one day. Depressed? If not, hold on. We're just starting.

Our environment is *designed* to work against us. It wasn't always like this. Adam & Eve had it pretty good in the Garden until they got themselves kicked out. When that happened, God frustrated creation and set it against us.

He created purposeful tension that will endure until we get back into the Garden: Almost as if it's intentional, Solomon just continues the Genesis narrative. Watch how masterfully these pieces fit together:

Genesis 3:17–19 (NLT)

¹⁷ And to the man he said, "Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. ¹⁸ It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."

Ecclesiastes 1:4–7 (NLT)

⁴ Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. ⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. ⁶ The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. ⁷ Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea.

NOTHING CHANGES

Not only is life meaningless and difficult, things down here are not going to change. Nothing changes. Billions of people have been here before us. If Jesus tarries, billions will come after us.

Think of all the history that's happened up to this point in time. What if we've just scratched the surface? There may be more Alexanders and Romans and Mongols and Turks.

We're all driving in a big circle. Seeing the same landmarks, waving at the same people, getting frustrated over the same things. What's there to say about today that we didn't already say about yesterday?

Paul McCartney addresses the sentiment in "*It's Just Another Day*."²

*Every day she takes a morning bath, she wets her hair,
Wraps a towel 'round her as she's heading for the
bedroom chair,
It's just another day.
Slippin' into stockings,
Steppin' into shoes,
Dippin' in the pocket of her raincoat,*

It's just another day.

*At the office where the papers grow she takes a break,
Drinks another coffee and she finds it hard to stay
awake,*

It's just another day.

² (McCartney, 1971)

He's singing the theme song to our lives. Pink Floyd was more to the point: "We've become comfortably numb."³

Why do I pick out some clothes, eat some cereal, and drive to work...only to know I'll be making the same drive and doing the same routine in reverse 8 hours later?

Ever run into an old acquaintance and spend some time swapping disbelief about how you ended up?

"Wow, I never thought I'd see you in a suit!"

"I'm surprised you reached 37 without being incarcerated. "

"I always figured you'd be in jail by now."

"I know, can you believe it? Here we are. A couple of adults."

We all have these conversations of genuine surprise although *everyone else's* progression through life is just to be expected. Recently, my wife and I were sharing disbelief that our son Luke is now 12. Even though he was born 12 years ago. We had no reason to doubt his progression. He's a healthy kid, so it's only natural that he'd get older one day at a time—just like the *rest* of the human race.

So, why do we do that? Why is *my* suit, and *my* lack of incarceration, *my* child's birthday a source of surprise and shock to *me*?

³ (Gilmour & Waters, 1980)

Now we're getting at the heart of this book. The hardest thing for you and I to acknowledge: We're not as important or different as we think.

On average, we're all average. On their 12th birthday, our kids turn 12. When we become adults, we adult. Ironed clothes, bills, groceries, SUVs...all the same boring stuff we saw our boring parents doing in their boring lives.

Before your triggers go off and you yell about being a snowflake, hear me out. This is actually really good news. As a friend used to say: "None of us are terminally unique." That's a theme Solomon will *encourage* us with time and time again.

Just not yet. First, he wants us to see how engrained it is to *resist* this. We fight back against the inevitable.

*I'm different. It's not just another day for me.
I'm unique. The sun doesn't set on me; the wind blows where I want it to; and the ocean seems to be full every time I look at it.*

Not content to learn from someone else's mistake, we keep insisting that we're different, and therefore our experience of the world must be different. Eventually, it leads to this:

Ecclesiastes 1:8 (NLT)

8 Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content.

NOTHING SATISFIES US

Once we start to realize how vain and elusive and temporary life down here is, and then we see the monotony is not changing (5,000 years ago, some fella was living a life similar to the one you're living, and he was afraid things in his life were futile and repetitive), darkness threatens to creep into our soul.

"I wake up and go to work...shovel my coal to earn a check...to buy food and clothes so I am able to go back and shovel my coal..."

When we start to come to grips with that, it's weary. It's heavy. I'll say it: it's depressing.

So, what do we do? We try to push it from our mind. We jump at anything that's shiny enough to give me relief!

We want distraction to deliver us. Whether you're a workaholic or an alcoholic, you're running from something. You're trying to escape reality and live on a substitute. It's not hard to understand why people consider drugs or death as a means to relief.

There's a reason you can binge watch 3 seasons of Breaking Bad on Netflix, turn the TV off and say, "I'm bored." It's the same reason you can get promoted, buy the new car, crank out 2.3 kids with your trophy wife, and then look around and ask, "What's next?"

The 1990s produced much music that's better forgotten. However, in 1995 a rapper theologian operating as "Skee-Lo"⁴ gave us this social commentary:

*I wish I was a little bit taller
I wish I was a baller
I wish I had a girl who looked good, I would call her
I wish I had a rabbit in a hat with a bat
And a six four Impala*

(no idea what he wants to do with the rabbit, but eventually he opens up)

*I confess it's a shame when you living in a city
That's the size of a box and nobody knows yo' name*

More to the point, 30 years before Mr. Skee-Lo's confession, Mick Jagger⁵ screams:

*I can't get no satisfaction.
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try*

We have appetites. We have lots of appetites. It doesn't matter if it's an appetite for cars or sex or dinner. What happens after you feed that appetite? It comes right back. That's what appetites do. Nobody has ever eaten bacon and eggs, pushed their plate away and said, "Well, that should cover breakfast. For life."

⁴ (Roundtree, 1995)

⁵ (Jagger & Richards, 1965)

No. Rather, we want second breakfast, elevensies⁶, and enough cars and sex to choke a horse (if horses ate cars and sex...you know what I mean).

What Solomon is saying here is this: *Life* is an appetite that can't be filled.

Whether it's hunger, desire, or the ocean, everything under the sun is like a bucket with a hole in it. There's no satisfaction to be found. Here's a sneak peek into the next chapter, Solomon tells us, "Look. I'm smarter and richer than you. I tried everything you *wish* you could try. None of it worked."

Every generation comes to grip with these realities and says, "Then we'll fix it all! We'll be smarter and work harder and progress past it!" Well, confidence often comes with ignorance. To that, Solomon says:

Ecclesiastes 1:9–11 (NLT)

⁹ History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. ¹⁰ Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!" But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. ¹¹ We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.

⁶ For those not acquainted with Tolkien, this is a reference to Hobbit appetites.

WE'RE NOT MAKING PROGRESS

Every generation comes along, drives some laps around the same cul-de-sac, and then dies. So, the next generation says,

"But we're different. Evolution has finally hit its peak with us. We'll just drive faster!"

So, they do. Maybe they make more laps around; maybe not. Then they die. I don't care how big your car is or how fast you drive it, one day you're going to die, we're going to paint you up, put you in a box in the ground, throw dirt on the box, and then go eat potato salad until we have to leave for our next important appointment.

Even when we think we've created or experienced something new, it's either because we went to public school⁷ and, therefore, don't know history, or we're entitled enough to actually think our experiences—good and bad—are somehow different than what people have been experiencing for thousands of years.

Those of you who lived through Y2K—the big year 2000—remember how that was going to change things? Computers would shut down. Banks would lose our money. Toasters would rise up to kill us!

Nope. January 1st, 2000 was just business as usual.

⁷ Don't be alarmed or read judgment into this statement. I am a proud graduate of Indiana public schools.

Even something as impressive as landing on the moon— as awesome as it is...turns out there's not much to do up there except look at the earth.

I'm not against research and advancement and study and growth. But I am against those achievements tricking us into thinking *our* existence in the universe is somehow now uniquely uncharted territory and—as a result—the human condition, our heart/emotions, and fundamental set of problems facing the human race is anything different than what's been happening under the sun since the dawn of time.

Men—just like you, your dad, your grandpa, Neil Armstrong, and every other man has struggled with whether he had what it takes to make it in the world.

Women—your mom, her mom, and all women everywhere have wrestled with questions of self-worth.

No number of trips to the moon is going to help us progress beyond the insecurities of our heart. Every year, over 15,000 self-help books are published in the United States, with an expected annual revenue of \$14 billion in 2025⁸. While I am not (even remotely) opposed to self-help books, the sheer volume of the genre's rapid growth reveals an awareness of our shortcomings and a desire—if not need—to overcome them.

⁸ (Zhang, 2024)

WISDOM IS A WOUND

Did you ever hear something you wish you didn't hear or read something you wish you didn't read (other than this chapter)? Ever see something you wished—with all your heart—you could un-see?

I remember the day I found out there was no Santa Claus. Then I started connecting the dots and deduced there wasn't a tooth fairy or Easter Bunny either. I was devastated. So much of what I believed was gone. Just like that. The magic vanished. It took my wife a month to convince me to get on with life and go back to work.

The song wasn't out yet, but years later Toby Keith would perfectly capture how I felt at that moment, "I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then."⁹ That's exactly what Solomon says next: ignorance really is bliss, because the more I know, the worse it gets.

Often, wisdom is a wound (cf. v.18). It's a wound that is messy and will bleed as long as we're down here under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:12–13 (NLT)

¹² I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. ¹³ I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race.

⁹ (Keith, 1994)

Why is life as we know it meaningless, repetitive, and unsatisfying? According to the wisest man who ever lived: because God made it that way. I like the ESV's¹⁰ literal translation:

Ecclesiastes 1:13b (ESV)

¹³ ... It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

As unsettling as that sounds, I think it's the key to putting this whole puzzle together...as much as we're able. Why the tragic existence? Why this unhappy business?

Do you ever ask for help when you don't need it? Ever ask someone to carry a package that is light enough for you to handle with one hand? When's the last time you used a dictionary on a word you already knew how to spell? Do you usually phone a friend for answers when the question is "2+2?" If you're like me, those tend to be my most cocky, prideful moments.

Again, Adam & Eve gave us the example: they had no tragic existence or unhappy business. Their whole existence was one big string of happy business. Did that cause them to fall down in worship and adoration? Hardly! Rather, they convinced themselves:

¹⁰ English Standard Version: a Bible translation popular for its mix of literal accuracy and readability. (English Standard Version, 2012)

“It’s time for us to go in business on our own. No need for God anymore.”

So, they gave God the finger (the finger He made) and leaped out into oblivion. Talking about wisdom being a wound, that knowledge cost them dearly. The result:

Ecclesiastes 1:14–15 (NLT)

¹⁴ I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind. ¹⁵ What is wrong cannot be made right. What is missing cannot be recovered.

Solomon is telling us what we know to be true and still spend our lives pretending as if it’s not: The past can’t be changed. There is no use worrying about how you might have done things differently.

“Under the sun” is a phrase Solomon will use 29 times to refer to down here; on earth; worldly speaking; from the human point of view. And from that perspective, there’s nothing under the sun to make you or me feel better about our tragic existence, our future, or our past. It’s just an anchor weighing us down until we finish driving our laps.

CONCLUSION

But, what about over the sun? Solomon spent his whole life feasting on everything under the sun. At the end of his life, he realizes the key to enjoying anything under the sun is to view it from the other side.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (NLT)

⁵⁸ So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.

I confess: I'm not always strong or immovable. Solomon's fears and insecurities are my fears and insecurities. But I am deeply intrigued by that last sentence.

To know: despite my insecurities, my work can produce something that is *not* meaningless or vain? If you don't have a view of the world that gives you deep contentment—blessed assurance—about the big questions in life, then Ecclesiastes is the book for you. It points us to a God who says:

John 10:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.



CHAPTER 2.

Should I Feel Bad for Feeling Good?

In the opening chapter to Ecclesiastes (one of three books he wrote), Solomon invited us to a big group therapy session where he shares a few seemingly depressive thoughts:

1. *Everything is meaningless*
2. *Nothing changes*
3. *Nothing satisfies*
4. *We're not making progress*
5. *Wisdom is a wound*

So, it's fair to ask: why study a book like this? Why write a book like this? Perhaps the best answer is: Because it's honest, and it's real. Ecclesiastes is full of the kind of thoughts we all have at one point or another whether we want to admit it or not. Throughout this book, Solomon

says, in effect: “I’m smart, I’m resourced, and I’m experienced. This is the true condition of every human under the sun.”

The message of Ecclesiastes is so true and so simple, we try to make it un-true by redefining terms or denying we ever feel this way or have these same thoughts. However, all of us wrestle with existential questions of meaning, monotony, contentment, self-improvement, and self-awareness.

We just read about those existential issues in the first chapter. The information is not taken from the headlines of Time or Newsweek or a psychology textbook, rather they come from the ancient book of Ecclesiastes.

The Greeks called this book Ecclesiastes. The Hebrews called it Koheleth. It describes the personal memoirs of a philosopher king who lived c. 1300 BC. Ecclesiastes happens to be part of a greater collection of writings gathered together in final form c. AD 95. For almost 2,000 years of history, one continual community has handed that same collection of writings to succeeding generations as a source of guidance and hope.

Over time, we came to refer to the entire collection by one name: the Bible. Some of you carried it bound in leather. Many of you have it on your phone. Some are skeptical of its reliability. Others question its true intent and purpose.

Regardless of where you stand, there’s no denying the Bible’s accuracy in describing the human condition. Written

2000 years before you were born (3000 in the case of Ecclesiastes), this book knows you. And—at least at first—it's not encouraging. Solomon's conclusions in chapter 1 are dismal. Upon initial examination, Solomon's prognosis is not good. So, he does what many of us do when we get bad news about hard realities: He runs from the truth and tries to numb it with anything that might cheer him up.

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

Ecclesiastes 2:1a (NLT)

¹I said to myself, "Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the 'good things' in life."

Solomon says, "Turn it up! Let the good times roll." Some of you may read "Let's try pleasure" and think, "Yeah. Let's do that. I like pleasure." Let me agree with you: "I like pleasure too." I'm very much pro-pleasure. I like comfortable shoes, good food, quality beer, loud music, and my wife. What's wrong with all that? Hopefully nothing. (We'll get back to that list at the end of the chapter.)

In the first chapter, Solomon asked, "Is there life before death?" Today Solomon is chasing another question, "Should I feel bad for feeling good?"

Ecclesiastes 2:1 (NLT)

¹I said to myself, "Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the 'good things' in life." But I found that this, too, was meaningless.

Solomon seems to be playing a ping pong game, riding a roller coaster of emotions. “Let’s be really happy and do a bunch of fun stuff!” Then, “I tried that. It was awful.” Charles Dickens opens his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*¹ with two well-known, seemingly contradictory lines: It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

Solomon seems to be doing the same thing throughout this entire book. Things are bad. So, be happy. Some of the best advice I give for every situation, “Be encouraged. It’s worse than you think.” If you’ve read the book, you know Dickens wasn’t wrong to say both at the same time. Neither is Solomon wrong. The key--the answer to “Should I feel bad for doing good?” lies in the tension. The tension created by our conscience is there to guide us in the right direction.

However, before we get ahead of ourselves, let’s watch Solomon’s train wreck unfold:

Ecclesiastes 2:2 (NLT)

² So I said, “Laughter is silly. What good does it do to seek pleasure?”

Who isn’t pro-laughter? I like comedy movies. I love watching stand-up comedians. I think they’re master communicators. It takes skill to craft a joke and its delivery in just the right way. However, as an end in itself, laughter comes up lacking. In one of his other books, Solomon comes to this conclusion:

¹ (Dickens, 1859)

Proverbs 14:13 (NLT)

¹³ Laughter can conceal a heavy heart, but when the laughter ends, the grief remains.

How many Robin Williams² do we need to prove this point? Those who live their lives on stage—particularly the masters of their craft—are often the loneliest, carrying the heaviest of hearts.

So Solomon continues his search...

Ecclesiastes 2:3a (NLT)

² After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine.

At this point, many may want to have a discussion on the morality of alcohol in general. Regardless of one's position or personal background, we have to be careful not to say more than the Bible does on any given issue. What Solomon is discussing—and condemning—here is relying on alcohol as medicine. As a culture, we celebrate it. Jimmy Buffet³ built a successful career singing about alcohol as a pastime.

*Wasted away again in Margaritaville,
Searchin' for my lost shaker of salt.
Some people claim that there's a woman to blame,
Now I think, - hell it could be my fault.*

² Robin Williams died by suicide on 11 August 2014 in Paradise Cay, CA.

³ (Buffet, 1977)

*I blew out my flip flop,
Stepped on a pop top;
Cut my heel, had to cruise on back home.
But there's booze in the blender,
And soon it will render
That frozen concoction that helps me hang on.*

No, these things are beneath us, friends. I don't say that in a condescending or condemning way, but as a word of encouragement. The problem isn't that God is anti-pleasure. Hardly! Pleasure is his idea. The problem is that we are too easily pleased! We stopped too soon. Look at the rest of the verse:

Ecclesiastes 2:3 (NLT)

³After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world.

Convinced there's more, Solomon keeps searching...

Ecclesiastes 2:4–6 (NLT)

⁴I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves.

If Solomon can't laugh and drink his way to satisfaction, he's going to build and work his way there. Building homes and vineyards—now he gets involved in real estate. Solomon was one of the most prolific builders of his day.

Gardens and parks—Solomon developed some phenomenal hobbies.

Ecclesiastes 2:7 (NLT)

⁷ I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me.

Slaves—these servants created time for more leisure activities. Solomon had an army of people working for him to do all the stuff he didn't want to do. What would you do if you had people doing the stuff you didn't want to do? The dishes? Fold laundry? Herds and flocks—Solomon owned his own private zoo. If you owned your own zoo—with enough employees to shovel all the manure so you didn't have to—would you be happy?

Solomon wasn't.

Ecclesiastes 2:8 (NLT)

⁸ I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!

Silver and gold—Solomon had more money than a horse has hair. Most of us think money is the necessary conduit to peace. "If only I was rich..." However, it doesn't matter who you ask. If the question is, "how much do you need to be happy?" The answer is always, "a little more." Rich is a moving target.

Ecclesiastes 2:8 (NLT)

⁸ I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!

Wonderful singers—wouldn't you like to have enough money that you could hire your favorite band to play for you whenever you want? I would. I would buy U2. The whole band. They'd go where I go and play "Beautiful Day" whenever I wanted them to.

Concubines—we all know what this was for. Some of you are thinking: "I like music and money and gardens and rhinoceroses, but to be really happy...I just want a bunch of good-looking women (or men) to sit around naked, for me. If I had that, I'd be happy, and I'd never leave the house." Solomon responds, "Yeah. I had that too. It didn't work."

He continues, "it doesn't really matter how smart I am either..."

Ecclesiastes 2:14–15 (NLT)

¹⁴ For the wise can see where they are going, but fools walk in the dark." Yet I saw that the wise and the foolish share the same fate. ¹⁵ Both will die. So I said to myself, "Since I will end up the same as the fool, what's the value of all my wisdom? This is all so meaningless!"

Don't take Solomon as being anti-education. However, there are limits to what education and knowledge can accomplish for us. We used to think we could solve everything from addictions to world wars if only people

could be educated. However, humankind simply uses our education to cook up sophisticated drugs and elegant ways of killing: by Genesis 4, Cain uses a rock to kill his brother; by Gen 9, Noah gets drunk and passes out naked. Thousands of years and lots of education later, we're just throwing bigger rocks at each other.

KEEPING SCORE

Ecclesiastes 2:9–10 (NLT)

⁹ So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me.

¹⁰ Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors.

Solomon says, “So in summary, I’m kind of a big deal. If you’re keeping score at home, I have everything: I’m richer and smarter than you. I experience no delayed gratification, and I have a great job. I am a very big deal.”

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (NLT)

¹¹ But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.

“I was a miserably depressed, bored, very big deal.” Toward the end of his life, Solomon realized he worked incredibly hard to climb all the ladders everyone wishes they could climb, only to find they were leaning against the wrong building.

Despair

If you trace his argument from the beginning, Solomon is coming unglued...

Ecclesiastes 2:20–21 (NLT)

²⁰ So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world. ²¹ Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn't worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy.

You can hear the emotion and anguish in his voice. I can almost imagine his hand shaking as he writes this. Reaching the end of his life, becoming contemplative, he asks, "What's all this been for? I worked for all of this, and now somebody else is going to step in carry it off when I die." It doesn't matter how smart you are or how great you were at your job: death is the great equalizer.

Here is his crescendo:

Ecclesiastes 2:22–23 (NLT)

²² So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? ²³ Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.

Who can't relate to this? We worry about whether we'll have enough work to provide. Then, we worry about whether we're working too much at the cost of quality time. It hurts physically—life and work start to wear on your body: sore back, bad eyesight, poor hearing. It hurts

emotionally—we grieve over whether we made the right decision or cry for the times we know we didn't: "I goofed around and partied too much. I drank too much or did too many drugs. I went through too much money, slept with too many people, and spent too much time at work." Solomon's story is a little too familiar, isn't it?

It keeps us up at night, rehearsing scenarios or conversations in our head. There's no peace.

CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes 2:24–25 (NLT)

²⁴ So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God.

²⁵ For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him?

It's interesting Solomon doesn't go back to the list and condemn all those things. That's the religious approach: Happiness by Subtraction⁴. Stop doing stuff. All of it. Instead, be moral (or legalistic, or fundamental, or whatever). Don't smile because you might laugh. Don't drink because you might get drunk. Don't listen to music because somebody might play the drums. Just feel bad whenever you feel good! Look miserable so everybody will want to die and go to heaven.

⁴ This metaphor comes from a Mark Driscoll sermon cited in the Bibliography. (Driscoll, 2015)

There are at least two problems with this religious, moral approach: 1—Moral people die and wake up in hell every day. Remember: it was religious people who killed Jesus, and they were extremely good at being moral. 2—All that stuff religion tells you to avoid...God made it: pleasure, joy, comedy, music, fried chicken, yes—even sex—it was all God’s idea. I like God’s ideas.

The opposite approach—the one taken by most of the world—is Happiness by Addition. Just keep adding more: more alcohol, more sex, more money, more hobbies. This is exactly what Solomon tried. In so doing, he stumbled across the law of diminishing returns: If you consume something long enough, it becomes harder to keep getting results. Any addiction proves this. There’s a reason “the first one is free.” Because soon you’re chasing it and can’t get enough.

Solomon—like each of us in our own way—was chasing all these things trying to find meaning and fulfillment. However, do you know what you call something that gives you meaning and fulfillment? God. If your source of meaning and fulfillment is not Jesus, then it’s an idol. That’s why the opposite of Christianity is not atheism. It’s idolatry.

As we return to our list of “good times” from the beginning of the chapter, Solomon offers this perspective: “stuff”—comedy, wine, work, hobbies, money, sex—is to be enjoyed. God made those things, and when approached with the proper posture, they are great sources of short-term enjoyment.

Stuff is to be enjoyed. God is for contentment and satisfaction.

Ecclesiastes 2:24–25 (NLT)

²⁴ So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God.

²⁵ For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him?

What do we do with all of the “stuff” that comes from God? We give him thanks and then enjoy it to his glory. One commentator puts it this way: “All of this stuff is like a can of peaches. We find the can, know there’s something good inside, and then go to work trying to break the can open or gnaw through it with our teeth. God comes along and says, ‘I have a can opener. Would you like me to open that for you? There’s no need to eat the whole can now—or save the whole thing for later—when you need more, just come back and ask. I’ll make sure you have all the cans and can openers you need.’”

Should I Feel Bad for Feeling Good? It depends on how you open the can of peaches. In the Psalms, David (Solomon’s dad) summarizes the way forward.

Psalms 16:11 (NLT)

¹¹ You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.



CHAPTER 3.

Why Does Life Feel So Hard?

In chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes, Solomon says: Life on earth can feel boring, and meaningless, and repetitive. Then you die. In chapter 2 he says: Here are a bunch of bad ideas on how to escape the pain of human existence. Now, in chapter 3 he suggests a better way.

Does life *have* to always feel so meaningless? No. One of the ways we addressed that was by suggesting we look at life from God's perspective--not yours and mine (see chapter 1). The closer our hearts move toward eternity, the less they are bothered by things "down here." So, let's ask: why do some things "down here" bother us so much? That's the question we're chasing in chapter 3: "Why does Life Feel so Hard?"

Do you ever ask that? Why does this feel so difficult right now? Why—when I’m giving this relationship or project or job my best effort—does it still not feel like enough?

One of the biggest reasons—if not the biggest reason—is that we’re not in heaven yet. We’ve already said it, but it’s so important it should be said again: We’re not in Heaven yet.

What do you call a life with no pain? Heaven.

What do you call a life with pain? Normal.

Heaven is home. This life is a journey to get *there*. Parts of *any* journey are fun; others are not. Sometimes you’re driving downhill with the wind at your back; other times, it’s an uphill grind with the rain blowing in your face. This balanced, complete perspective is what Solomon unpacks in chapter 3.

Many people have no idea these words come from the Bible. They think the Byrds wrote them in 1960s¹. Actually, Solomon wrote them to help us understand: Why does Life Feel so Hard? At least one of the answers to that question (the one he explains in chapter 3) is something over which we have considerable influence.

A POEM ABOUT TIME

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NLT)

¹ For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.

¹ (Seeger, 1965)

One of the keys to not making life harder than it needs to be is knowing the answer to a vital question: What season am I in right now?

Allow me to explain by returning to one of my primary sources of sermon material: my kids. One of my sons is just now tackling potty training. That's his season of life, and he's super-excited about it. He announces every time he has to go, then he runs in there, jumps up on the seat, pees in the toilet, jumps back down, slams the lid shut, flushes, and then yells at his pee to "stay in there and not come back!" It's all very dramatic. I have another son who is a little older than this one. He's moved on from the potty, and now the world is his toilet. He often pees in the yard. Why? Because he can. What's my point?

Those stories are only cute and funny because they're age-appropriate to their season of life. Nobody would think it was cute if I did either of those things. Sadly, that season of life has passed for me. It wouldn't do me any good to grieve the fact that I now must wear pants in public. I'm in a different season of life now. It is what it is.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT SEASON OF LIFE YOU'RE IN?

Solomon says life is a vapor—here today and gone tomorrow. So, it's crucial you know what time it is—especially when we add verse 2:

Ecclesiastes 3:2 (NLT)

² A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest.

You weren't in charge of your birth, so you won't oversee your death either. Only one man ever controlled His entry and His exit into the world. Jesus. That's why we worship *Him*. For the rest of us, if we want to avoid a lifetime of frustration, we need to learn the difference between command and control:

Command is influence. It's our ability to react and respond to the seasons of life coming at us.

Control is an illusion. At least for us. Control is the changing of the season.

God has control of the seasons of your life. He allows us to have some degree of command in responding to the seasons.

Why does life feel so hard? Because we try to control the season rather than navigate through it. Rather than checking the weather report, we dress for summer in the middle of winter. God has control over the season. Wise people know what season of life they're in:

1 Chronicles 12:32 (NLT)

³² From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.

Wouldn't you want that said of you? Not just at your funeral, but now? "Tyler just seems like a wise dude. He's

got a good perspective on what's going on and where he needs to be, what he needs to be doing, who he needs to be talking to, places he needs to be avoiding, skills he needs to be developing..."

If not—if you don't know the season and the time—not only will you be more frustrated than you need to be, but you'll miss precious opportunities that only come into your life for a season.

If you have more time on your hands right now than in other seasons, how can you redeem that time? If your kids are at home, living under your roof, make good use of that season because it won't last forever.

You can't control the amount of time you have in each season or the number of years you have on earth, but you can influence whether those days have any value.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 (NLT)

² A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance.

Expectation management is a powerful thing, so let's state the obvious: some of the seasons will feel better than others. Laugh, embrace, and dance your way through the happy seasons. Yes and amen! When that happy season passes, it may be followed by a bad season where tears and grief are appropriate. When those seasons of tears come into your life, please be comforted with these two thoughts. Both come from one of the most quoted Bible verses of all

time. Solomon's dad, David, wrote the 23rd Psalm. Here's v.4:

Psalm 23:4 (NLT)

⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

Comfort 1: God will be there in the dark seasons too.

When God says, "I will never abandon you" He means "I will never abandon you." So wise people ask, "What might be the point of this dark season? Is there something I can learn?" Every major player in the Bible not only had seasons of mourning and tears in the wilderness, but we're told God *took them there* Himself so he could test and strengthen them.

Psalm 23:4 (NLT)

⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

Comfort 2: A dark season is not a life sentence.

David didn't say he was camping out or taking up residence in the dark valley. He said he was walking *through* it. Whatever it is you're going through now, you're going *through* it. It's a season, not a life sentence. Don't get stuck in a season of darkness—or a season of partying. Keep moving. As Winston Churchill is often credited with saying, "If you're going through hell, keep going."

Ecclesiastes 3:5-6 (NLT)

⁵ A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. ⁶ A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away.

Whether it's people, stuff, or money: everything and everyone is either moving into your life or out of your life. In light of that, here are a few wise questions:

Am I trying too hard to maintain a relationship that's run its course?

If that relationship is with your spouse, the answer is no; keep trying until one of you meets Jesus face-to-face; murder is not an option. For many other relationships, perhaps that person came into your life to teach you something, to share a season with you, or for you to teach them or carry a burden for them. But, if the next season is leading or forcing you apart, be wise enough to recognize that and keep moving.

This is not a suggestion to devalue good relationships, but rather to be aware of the transience of life. Life is a vapor, a mist. Be a good steward of your time and your emotions.

Am I spending when I should be saving?

I'm not "anti-stuff." Once people learn we homeschool our kids, some envision a Little House on the Prairie situation wherein my wife makes all the kids' clothes, and I have them forage for their own dinner. That's not the case at all. We have a TV and a nice couch.

But, we also have an emergency savings account, retirement savings, and we buy used cars. The lesson here: resist the urge to spend every dollar you touch. Instead, save for your family's future by being a responsible steward of your finances.

Am I hoarding when I should be sharing?

Even Dave Ramsey² would say: saving can become excessive if you never share. Don't be like the man in Luke 12 who kept building more barns to hoard his stuff. Decide to be a financial blessing to somebody else. You won't regret it.

Am I getting ready when I should be getting to work?

Am I always searching and rehearsing and collecting without ever pulling the trigger and taking action? One preacher likens this to a gun collector who collects guns, cleans the guns, polishes the guns, but never *shoots* the guns. Live your life with a bias toward results; when it's time, shoot the gun. If not, your whole life will be: "Ready, aim, aim, aim, ready, aim, aim, dead."

Ecclesiastes 3:7-8 (NLT)

⁷ A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. ⁸ A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.

² Dave Ramsey is a financial advisor advocating for debt-free living.

With these verses, depending on your personality, you'll naturally lean one way or another. If you're wise, you'll know where your biases are and when it's time to lean the other way. I've spent considerable portions of my life wishing I would have stopped talking five minutes ago. So, I must remind myself: I rarely regret not saying something.

However, you can move into a season of your life when peer pressure or "fear of man" issues cause you to stay seated when it's time to stand up. Knowing the season means asking whether you're talking because you have to say something or because you have something to say.

In every area of life, at every level of existence: personal, family, community, national, international, this truth remains: all peace is earned peace. If you want a peaceful life, you're going to have to work for it.

Remember: we're not in Heaven yet, so strife and struggle are to be expected. That's not an excuse—for a person or a president—to rush to war every time she's offended. However, there's no biblical argument to be made for 100% pacifism.

Throughout the entire Bible—from The Flood to Revelation—God is waging war against evil. At times, He calls on us to join the struggle. For that reason, it is crucial each of us knows which season of life we're in and when our natural biases might be causing blind spots.

Quick Summary

In Ecclesiastes 3.1-8, Solomon gives us a comprehensive list that speaks into every season of life we might encounter. I encourage you to go back later to read the list and see just how thorough it is. He leaves no stone unturned. There are 14 positive statements and 14 negative statements.

He does this to remind us: each of us has a role to play.

You have a role to play. You have a responsibility to act rightly. Yes, God is sovereign. He's on the throne. He is in control. But, He's given you command. You are able—so you are expected—to analyze and react to the changing seasons of life.

Why does Life Feel so Hard? Sometimes, it's because we stop thinking—really thinking—about which season of life we're in. One reason Christians should be opposed to “party-line” partisan politics is that it's far too simplistic. If you're a wise person, aware of the changing season, it's not possible to *always* be a liberal, a democrat, or a conservative, a republican, etc.

We must be able to think for ourselves; the world is not one-dimensional. Neither is our Creator.

God doesn't just give life. He also brings death. He doesn't just build. He also tears down. God is not only pro-peace. The Bible also calls Him a warrior. To know who God is and your place in the world He created, never stop asking,

“What time is it? What season am I in?” No one did this better than Jesus:

Galatians 4:4 (NLT)

¹But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law.

During the time of Jesus' entry into the world, there was tremendous amount of *Jewish Unrest* and pressure due to the Pharisees' legalistic enforcement of God's guidance. There was also a sense of *Gentile Defeatism* and despondency with the pagan gods. People were seriously starting to question whether the pantheon of deities could do anything for them. Additionally, there was a *Common Greek Language* throughout the entire known world, enabling cross-cultural communication among varying religious and ethnic people groups. Finally, there existed a system of *Roman Roads* that allowed long-distance transportation to occur quickly and safely for the first time in recorded history.

This is why Jesus said:

Mark 1:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ “The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”

And even after years of plotting to kill Jesus, we read:

John 7:30 (NLT)

³⁰ Then the leaders tried to arrest him; but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come.

Jesus was always on time. As Gandalf said of wizards, “He is never late or early. He arrives precisely when he means to.” Jesus is in command and control of the seasons of *his* life *and* our life—including our death:

Hebrews 9:27 (NLT)

²⁷ And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment,

It’s going to happen. The death rate is one-per-person. That’s why Solomon tells us:

Ecclesiastes 3:10–11 (NLT)

¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. ¹¹ Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.

This verse is the reason many commentators have said: This book knows you. It is also the reason why there are very few atheists³—confidently denying God’s existence. That kind of bold atheism requires far too much faith for anyone.

³ In this conversation, I attempt to contrast atheism with agnosticism. The former disavows all god-centric worldviews, while the latter admits an inability to confidently resolve the discussion. Atheism rests on bold faith in one’s ability to exhaustively disprove God’s existence. Adherents of agnosticism—more humbly in my opinion—acknowledge their own limitations.

As much as we may struggle to deny it, there is an unrest inside of you and me. To some degree, our hearts are at a constant state of turbulence. Star Wars fans might say there is a disturbance in the force preventing us from feeling truly content and at peace without a relationship with our Creator. This is why we should not be unkind to one another, our coworkers and friends, either believer or unbeliever.

CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes 3:13–14 (NLT)

¹³ And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God. ¹⁴ And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose is that people should fear him.

Do these verses teach that we should quiver and shake at mere thought of God? No. Rather, they remind us God's plans never need corrected. They're never wrong. They don't need revised or added to. To quote the greatest band of all time, "What you don't have, you don't need it now."

It means Jesus is always in command of our lives. That should produce at least two emotions in us:

Humility

"You mean God would give me any fruits from my labor?" Remember: the whole point of Christmas is we've messed up this world so much, Jesus had to come down here and

die to make it right. If after that, He still sees fit to give me *any* gifts, I should be incredibly humble. Any pride in me only exists when I've forgotten what Christianity is really about. "Prideful Christian" is a contradiction of terms.

Security

Becoming a Christian doesn't zip us off to some magical fairytale land with unicorns and no boy bands. We live in the same world: our kids have problems, we're susceptible to diabetes and addictions; sometimes our emotions get the best of us. But, it does mean we're never alone in this world. God has no abandoned children. Even when you are going through the darkest valley, you can rest well at night knowing God is there by your side.



CHAPTER 4.

How do I Stay Alive When I Feel so Alone?

One of the writers of the Bible has some serious issues with God. His name is Solomon. We're told he's the wisest man who ever lived (1 Kings 4.30). If the wisest man who ever lived—a man who wrote 3 books of the Bible—had some issues with God, just assume you're going to have some too.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is writing about his issues with God. He decides he's going to step into the ring and go a few rounds with God. He just finished round 1. You can read about the first round of Solomon's issues with God in Ecclesiastes 1-3.

Now we're starting round 2. It begins in Ecclesiastes 4. Round 2 is more personal than round 1. In round 1, he asks philosophical questions about the meaning and monotony of life. In round 2, Solomon walks outside his palace and takes a stroll through the streets. He visits people at work and at home—peeking into the windows of our lives and commenting. The opening verse tells us what he finds.

Ecclesiastes 4:1 (NLT)

¹ Again, I observed all the oppression that takes place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and their victims are helpless.

What does he see? People are lonely. This is a theme he'll return to throughout the whole chapter. I think Solomon would've resonated with these Beatles Lyrics⁴:

*All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?*

Solomon goes on:

Ecclesiastes 4:2–3 (NLT)

² So I concluded that the dead are better off than the living. ³ But most fortunate of all are those who are not

⁴ (Lennon & McCartney, 1966)

yet born. For they have not seen all the evil that is done under the sun.

As we read Ecclesiastes together, I want you to pay as much attention to what Solomon doesn't say as to what he does. When it comes to most of his problems with God, Solomon doesn't offer a solution. He doesn't try to solve everything.

What does Solomon have to say about all the lonely people who are oppressed and without help? "They're better off having never been born."

If you're thinking: "Well, that doesn't solve anything..." I agree. It doesn't.

And, here's one of *my* issues with God: God is under no obligation to make sense to me. He doesn't have to explain Himself. So, sometimes He doesn't. And I hate it as much as my kids hate it when my answer to their "Why" is "Because I said so."

Ecclesiastes is more concerned with survival than solutions.

It's written for people who are just trying to make it every day. Sure—I'd like to understand why God let's bad things happen to good people and why bad people always seem to have more power than good people. But in the meantime, I'm just trying to make it to Tuesday. I've got so many problems of my own, I'm just trying to put one foot in front of the other without causing more pain to the people around me.

So, whether you agree with verses 2-3 or not, it doesn't matter. Why? Because you *have* been born, these verses don't apply to you or me. It's a tough, messy world you and I live in. But, we have to live in it.

So, how do we do that when we feel so lonely? That's what Solomon's chasing at this point in the book: How do I Stay Alive When I Feel Alone?

STAYING ALIVE

How do I Stay Alive When I Feel Alone? How do we deal with loneliness?

This is not about having a roommate, or spouse, or kids, or getting picked last at dodgeball. I once asked a single friend, "Do you ever get lonely?" His reply, "Not after I learned how to be alone without being lonely." That's what we're after in this chapter.

Loneliness is the default condition of human existence. In other words, without some intentional intervention, we will become lonely. Genesis illustrates this with the first ever negative statement recorded in the Bible:

Genesis 2:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

Adam almost had it made. Living in the beautiful Garden of Eden with God above him and creation below him. But—even in Eden—without a partner beside him, he was not

“good.” Prevention of Adam’s loneliness required an active, intentional intervention. If we’re going to do the same for our lives, we need to understand why we feel alone.

WHO IS PRONE TO LONELINESS?

Solomon gives us at least 3 kinds of people who are prone to loneliness:

Ecclesiastes 4:4 (NLT)

⁴ Then I observed that most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors. But this, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind.

What’s the first barrier to friendship and community? Envy.

Envy runs in a pack with jealousy, greed, and pride. If you find one, you’ll usually find the others. Envy and Greed keep me from celebrating with you if it doesn’t benefit me. Greed says, “I owe me more.” Envy says, “God owes me more.”⁵ Either way, *you* shouldn’t have gotten it.

Pride will never let me enjoy *anything* unless I have more of it than you. I don’t need to be rich. I just need to have more money than you. I don’t need to be pretty—as long as I’m not as ugly as you.

⁵ I first heard it explained this way from Andy Stanley in his book, *Enemies of the Heart: Breaking Free from the Four Emotions That Control You* (Stanley, 2011)

You don't have to think very hard to figure out how envy causes deep-seated loneliness. Until you can genuinely celebrate the success of somebody else, you'll never feel like you belong. Anywhere.

I'm not even going to ask you to think about whether you're ever guilty of this. As your fellow human, I'm just going to answer on your behalf: Yes. You are. For the entirety of humanity, pride is, to some degree, inescapable. One may only hope to tame it or perhaps redeem its effect on our life.

From the moment Adam & Eve got jealous because God had more knowledge than them, humans have been walking off this cliff ever since. It was present in the very next generation. Among Adam and Eve's kids, Cain killed Abel. Why? Because he was jealous when God accepted Abel's offering but not his.

Whether it's shaped like envy, jealousy, greed, or pride, this is the mother of all sins, and it gives birth to loneliness everywhere it goes. Here are two more causes of loneliness:

Ecclesiastes 4:5-6 (NLT)

⁵ "Fools fold their idle hands, leading them to ruin." ⁶ And yet, "Better to have one handful with quietness than two handfuls with hard work and chasing the wind."

Depending on your personality, you're going to naturally lean more into one of these than the other: laziness or being a "workaholic." Which one is more of a temptation for you?

Laziness is a disease. Laziness is the slow, comfortable path to self-destruction. Most translations say, “The fool folds their idle hands and eats his own flesh.” When you’re lazy, if something is not done for you, then it’s not going to get done.

How does laziness cause loneliness (besides the fact that lazy people are not very fun to be around)? Because relationships take a lot of work and sweat and effort. They’re not easy because people are not easy.

If you’ve ever been married, you know what I mean. My marriage has required more real effort than anything I’ve ever done. Not just because my wife is a sinner, but because she’s married to one. Anytime you take two sinners and melt them down into one person, it’s going to take a lot of work.

We all instinctively know this one thing: Life is messy.⁶ The reason I know your life is a mess is because I’m so intimately aware of the mess that is my own life. Just think about it: you have personal standards that you don’t always live up to. When you *do*, your first instinct is to become proud and boastful about it. That’s why nobody posts a selfie without posing and staging first. When you *don’t* live up to your standards, you feel down on yourself and/or jealous of others who are doing better than you. It’s a mess.

⁶ For an expanded discussion of this topic see Chapter 11 as well as www.FromTheFray.com/still-in-the-fray (Mesaeh, Still in the Fray, 2018)

That is the reason many of us don't bother with relationships. They're too much work, so we fold our hands in idleness and refuse to hang out with any other humans.

If laziness isn't your thing, consider the workaholic. The workaholic is a two-fisted consumer. This guy has no time for relationships because he's never content with what he has. "We'll hang out tomorrow...*if* I get off work on time." If this is you, free time is always on the horizon but never in reach. You are always restless. As soon as peace and joy become a possibility, you start to think, "What if..."

The idea that you can have "too much" of anything seems foreign to you. If you've ever ordered two scoops of ice cream on a hot day, you know what I mean: If I pay for two scoops, then I must eat both scoops. There's no way I can enjoy *any* of the ice cream if I have to end up throwing *some* of it away. So, the whole time I have the cone in my hand, the only thing I can think about is, "I have to finish this before it starts to melt." Consequently, I'm not fully enjoying *any* of it—let alone the people I'm with. To keep with Solomon's terminology, "I'm better to have one scoopful with pleasure than two scoopfuls with a brain freeze."

These are two equal and opposite errors. Both are selfish. One is self-cannibalizing. The other is all-consuming. If you're not self-aware, constantly checking your blind spots, you'll naturally drift into one of these two lanes. Neither of these is the *carpool* lane though. Whether you're floating to lazy town or speeding back to work, you're going alone.

WHAT LONELY LOOKS LIKE

Loneliness is the default state of human existence. Some are more prone to loneliness than others. According to Solomon, there are at least 3 people most susceptible: we're all vulnerable when it comes to envy; just assume this *is* sneaking around somewhere close to your heart. Depending on your personality, either laziness or work-worship can cost you friends. This is what it looks like:

Ecclesiastes 4:8 (NLT)

⁸ This is the case of a man who is all alone, without a child or a brother, yet who works hard to gain as much wealth as he can. But then he asks himself, "Who am I working for? Why am I giving up so much pleasure now?" It is all so meaningless and depressing.

Solomon paints an accurate picture of American "rugged individualism." Eventually, the American Dream becomes the American nightmare, perhaps best illustrated by the British character Ebenezer Scrooge⁷.

Nobody lists Ebenezer Scrooge as her hero; he is the personification of loneliness. However, by the end of the novel, Scrooge can almost be heard singing⁸:

*You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
When the road looks rough ahead*

⁷ (Dickens, A Christmas Carol, 1843)

⁸ (Newman, 1996)

*And you're miles and miles
From your nice warm bed
You just remember what your old pal said
Boy, you've got a friend in me
Yeah, you've got a friend in me*

What a Friend Looks Like

Like a police sketch artist, Solomon gives us a thumbnail image of what a friend looks like:

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (NLT)

⁹ Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. ¹⁰ If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. ¹¹ Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? ¹² A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

One of my favorite commentators, Warren Wiersbe, breaks this down into 4 “w-words.”⁹

(v.9) Work

A friend will help share the load. If your car broke down, do you have anybody you would not have to pay to come help? Only to a friend can you say, “I know the weather is great, but I need ALL of your Saturday to come help me

⁹ (Wiersbe, 2010)

change the transmission in my truck, clean the attic, and then build me a new garage.” I hope you have someone to help you work.

(v.10) Walk

As you’re going through life, you need to have a few people who know you well enough to see your blind spots and—this is the important part—*call you out* when necessary. Who—right now—feels empowered to pull you aside and say, “Look, man. Your life is a mess. I’m not going anywhere. We’re going to work on it, because right now...you’re a hot mess.” I hope you have someone who will pick you up or catch you.

(v. 11) Warm

Unlike when this was written, most people reading this now have heating and indoor plumbing. But, the idea is still relevant. Who do you bring joy to? Who brings joy to you? I pray you have a friend who can have you laughing in stitches.

(v. 12) Watch

Who’s got your back? You need at least one friend who is willing to help you hide the bodies. What Solomon is saying here is something every city kid grew up knowing: if you’re going to fight, bring backup. My boys know I expect them never to start a fight. If possible, walk away. But, if that’s not possible, and you’re all there, every one of you had better come home dirty. There’s only one rule in fighting: win. Solomon says, “If someone’s coming at you, get 2 or 3

guys together and make them think twice.” Hopefully, you’ve got a few of these people in your corner.

How do I Stay Alive When I Feel Alone?

Nobody wants to experience loneliness, so here’s our original question: How do I Stay Alive When I Feel Alone?

We’re going to get very practical with an example of what right looks like. But first, let me say what I shouldn’t have to say but I do because we’re all sinners who need to read Solomon’s next verse:

Ecclesiastes 4:13 (NLT)

¹³ It is better to be a poor but wise youth than an old and foolish king who refuses all advice.

In other words: always have a teachable spirit. On every topic, with all people, at all times, maintain a teachable spirit. Nobody likes a know-it-all who always must “add value” or improve on everything we say. One of the quickest ways to make someone feel valued (and friendly toward you) is to use what Colin Powell calls the ‘4 most empowering words in your vocabulary’: What is your opinion? The question doesn’t commit you to anything other than sincerely listening to their answer.

Even when you’re the king talking to a young man, stay humble. Humility is a ruined word, so we must define it. Society hears “humble” and pictures somebody dressed in rags crying “Woe is me. I’m so low. I don’t matter.” That’s not humble. Put simply, humility is others-focused.

In that last example of what “humble” means today, you’re still “me-focused.” Without even knowing it, we can—no we *will*—unconsciously run every thought through a “me filter.”

How do I feel today? What do I want to do? What should I do to have a good day?

Why did he say that? Is it because he thinks this _____ about me?

I wonder if she likes me? I wonder if he likes me?

Instead, be intentional to approach every single person with real humility. CS Lewis is brilliant when he writes this in Mere Christianity¹⁰:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody.

Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

More succinctly: Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.

How do you stay alive when you feel like loneliness is trying to kill you? By staying humble. Humility is the way

¹⁰ (Lewis, 1952)

forward. The less I think of myself, the less I notice my own problems.

Here are three practical suggestions for applying humility to the three root causes of loneliness:

Envy

Whoever you're currently jealous of, take a Genuine Interest in them as a person. Everyone is their own favorite topic of conversation. You'd rather talk about you. I'd rather talk about me. Kill envy, jealousy, greed, etc. by asking him/her genuine questions about themselves. Just give somebody an opportunity to talk about themselves.

Laziness

If you're prone to idle laziness, chances are you need to forget your feelings. They're overrated; mine are too. Feelings are especially overrated in the area of "motivation." Lazy people tend to think motivation is a magical set of emotions that give you an injection of drive and energy just *before* something important happens.

That's backwards.

Motivation is the momentum you feel *after* you start down the right path. Forget your feelings. Instead, do something friendly for another person. You'll be surprised at how quickly your emotions will catch up to your obedience.

Work-worship

If this is you—joy and friendship and peace are always out there on the horizon, then keep score daily. In other words: don't fall into the trap of trying to measure your joy based on what you will get done, what you will earn, or who you will have in your life. Instead, force yourself every day to ask, "Where did I find real rest and joy today?" Better yet: "Whose life did I bring joy into today?" Stop keeping score based on tomorrow. Tomorrow doesn't exist yet. Keep score daily.

CONCLUSION

As always, Jesus is the example of what right looks like. We'll close with some infamous criticism thrown against him:

Matthew 11:19a (NLT)

¹⁹ The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, 'He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!'

I love this verse because—despite the social pressure to only spend time with religious people—Jesus chose to hang out with you and me instead. He didn't do it for any kind of reward or self-focused motivation. It was exactly the opposite.

He just did it because He *decided* to love you. At great cost to himself, He took a genuine interest in you and me. He did it already knowing what you're hiding in your sock

drawer and what's lurking in your past that you're trying to keep hidden from everybody. He did it even though He was busy saving the world.

If you want to stay alive when you feel alone, consider Jesus.



CHAPTER 5.

Can I Get God to Do What I Want?

Before we begin our fifth chapter studying Ecclesiastes together, let's review the questions Solomon has addressed so far:

1. *Is there Life Before Death?*
2. *Should I Feel Bad for Feeling Good?*
3. *Why Does Life Feel so Hard?*
4. *How do I Stay Alive when I Feel Alone?*

There are at least two common themes to these questions:

1. *They are the kind of questions polite people don't like to ask out loud--for a number of reasons*
2. *They are the kind of questions that come from people who are just trying to make it everyday*

What do we mean by that? Ecclesiastes is not a collection of academic, theological solutions. Rather, it is more of a survival manual than a set of solutions. Ecclesiastes is about practical survival in a world where survival is not guaranteed. There's no time for a bunch of philosophy or theory or theological debate when life is eating your lunch.

To be clear: I am not against those things. I probably enjoy them *too* much. In fact, I am *certain* there have been seasons in my life when I enjoyed philosophy and theology and solutions and big books written by dead guys too much. You can reach a point where your connection to God is entirely intellectual. It can become more intellectual than comforting.

In other words: you know enough to do well in a Bible trivia match, but you don't understand what Paul means by "peace that transcends understanding"—at least you can't remember the last time you did. If your connection to God is entirely intellectual, then that connection becomes severed the moment something happens that you don't understand. You have no comfort when God stops doing things that make sense to you.

Eventually, you ask the question Solomon addresses in this section of his discourse: Can I Get God to Do What I Want Him to Do?

Now, I know this is entirely too crude and unpolite of a question for any of you to ask. None of you have ever wondered, "Is it possible to just get God to give me what I

want?” That’s why this book is called, “Asking for a Friend.” So, the next time your friend asks, “Can I Get God to do What I Want Him to Do?”, you’ll have something to say.

Fair warning before I go any further: I’m going to use a bunch of adult language. It will make some of you uncomfortable. I’m not talking about 4-letter words and bad grammar. That’s not adult language. Any child can use that language. I’m talking about language only an adult can use and appreciate. Things that are true but may not be popular. Things that we need to hear even though they may not be immediately comforting. Some of this adult language is difficult and unsettling for me too. But, it’s kind of like vegetables: they may not taste great, but every adult knows they are the healthiest, most important thing on your plate.

Whether you consider yourself a believer, religious, spiritual, atheist, agnostic, pagan, etc., at some point in your life, you’re going to ask God for something. Some people do it every day: “Dear God, please give me a parking place.” Others only do it in dire emergencies that force them to admit—for the first time—“...maybe there’s something or someone up there who’s able to help.”

Depending on your experience, sometimes God gives you what you ask for; sometimes not. In this chapter, I want to talk about the times He doesn’t. I’m not talking about a new car or a parking spot or a good hair day. I’m going to assume the absence of those things in your life isn’t going to send you off the deep end. I’m talking about:

"I don't want a divorce."

"I haven't had a job in 8 months."

"I don't want my kid to die."

During those times—when God's not helping how we think He should, what do we do? At least one of the things we do is get angry and frustrated and ask: Can I Just Get God to do What I Want? "Just this once! What do I need to do so God will come through and do His part?"

If we're desperate, we can get creative in trying to get what I want. Solomon is going to show us at least three things we do to try to make God behave. Then he'll tell us what we should try instead.

MAKING GOD BEHAVE

Ecclesiastes 5:1a (ESV)

¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

Solomon starts off telling us how to approach God. This is something Solomon knew about. Solomon is the guy who oversaw the construction of the Temple (7 years, 153,000 men). Everything about the Temple was to remind you: God is in heaven; you're on earth. You immediately wanted to look up at how tall and majestic God's Temple was.

Solomon says: watch your feet; pay attention to your steps. Watch out where you're going and what you're doing. There are some things you can do that you know have historically stirred your emotions for God. There are other things you know will rob you of affection for Christ and

instead, take you to another place¹¹. So, Solomon says: look at your feet.

Which direction are you going?

What are you pursuing?

Are you walking closer toward God, or away from Him?

He goes on to give us a list of things we do when trying to get God to do what we want. First, let us acknowledge: We all come to God because we want something from Him. At no point am I suggesting we should stop asking God for stuff. The opposite—He designed us to be dependent on Him because He likes meeting our needs.

What Solomon is correcting here is the way we approach God. He's pointing out the most common sins we commit trying to maintain the connection. The assumption is that you *do* have a connection to God. He's talking to us—believers—and reminding us to be careful.

Ecclesiastes 5:1 (NLT)

¹ As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. It is evil to make mindless offerings to God.

("Keep your ears open and mouth shut."—we'll get back to that when he repeats it below)

¹¹ For an excellent exposition on this section of Ecclesiastes, see Matt Chandler's sermon series cited in the Bibliography. (Chandler, 2006)

Buying God Off

One of the things we do when trying to get God to do what we want is we try to buy God off "...with mindless offerings or foolish sacrifices." What does he mean by "mindless offerings" or "foolish sacrifices?"

First, we need to make sure we all understand "Temple-based Religion."

God is 'over there' (in the temple, statue, box, ark, etc.); If you want something from God, go 'over there,' and talk to the priest. The priest will explain the Rules. Depending on the religion, there's lots of rules—rules about life (do this; don't do that); especially rules about worship (stand, sit, kneel, sing, shout, clap, don't clap, dance, don't dance) and rules about offering.

Depending on what you wanted from God, the priest would give you a specific set of rules about the kind of offering: animal, bird, wheat, money, chicken, child, etc. As a result, there is often a fine line between religion and superstition.

The rules say to bring 1 chicken, but I really need this job: so, I'm bringing 3 chickens.

When I go to the job interview, I'm taking this temple rock in my pocket for good luck.

Solomon is saying: only a fool thinks he can bend God's arm into submission. Once superstition creeps in, you end up worse off every time you go to the Temple because your belief gradually shifts from trust in God to trust in the

system of rules. So, Solomon reminds us: sacrifice is not a substitute for obedience.

1 Samuel 15:22 (NLT)

²² But Samuel replied, "What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.

Now—our conscience already knows this: obedience and submission are better than sacrifice and offering. Our hearts all know: Sacrifice is not a substitute for obedience. That's *why* we turn to superstition: writing a check and carrying a rosary is easier than treating people with kindness and telling the truth. Solomon reminds us of the foolishness involved here.

God attacks the whole thing head on; I find this kind of funny:

Psalm 50:9 (NLT)

⁹ But I do not need the bulls from your barns or the goats from your pens.

In other words: do you really think God is in Heaven saying, "I'm almost out of roast beef. I hope somebody shows up soon with a cow. First person to walk in here with a cow gets whatever she wants for the next 20 minutes!" God goes on, continuing to mock the idea:

Psalm 50:12 (NLT)

¹² If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for all the world is mine and everything in it.

God says: “Even if I did have an insatiable need for all these chicken wings, do you think I’d need your help? You can’t even scratch places on your own back without help from a friend or a tree, so dispense with the silly superstition that I need all of your goats. It’s much bigger than that.”

Psalm 50:14 (NLT)

¹⁴ Make thankfulness your sacrifice to God, and keep the vows you made to the Most High.

“Instead, bring some real sacrifices and stay honest.” What’s a real sacrifice? How can you tell the difference between the real ones God desires and the foolish ones Solomon warns us against? When you give a real sacrifice, it influences how you live your life—specifically, it changes your character. Faith will change your character. Here’s a cobbled together list of the things God calls a good sacrifice:

Your body (Rom 12.1-2)

People won to Christ (Rom 15.16)

Money (Phil 4.18)

Praise & Good Works (Heb 13.15-16)

A Broken Heart (Ps 51.17)

Prayers of Faith (Ps 141.1-2)

How many times have you and I gone to church, sang a few songs, dropped \$20 in the plate, struggled to stay awake during the sermon, then left to cuss at the traffic keeping us

from getting home in time to watch football? Into all that, Solomon says: watch yourself. Be careful.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–3 (NLT)

¹ As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. It is evil to make mindless offerings to God. ² Don't make rash promises, and don't be hasty in bringing matters before God. After all, God is in heaven, and you are here on earth. So let your words be few. ³ Too much activity gives you restless dreams; too many words make you a fool.

Talking God into Submission

Four times in three verses, Solomon warns against talking too much. Regardless, we still think we can talk God into submission. In the last chapter, we talked about the importance of listening to other people. Chances are, the people who need to hear that message didn't receive it because they either weren't listening or assumed I was talking about someone else.

Solomon's warning here is against those who refuse to listen to God. We've all heard that guy who insists on praying until the food gets cold (if you don't know that guy, maybe *you're* that guy). Or, maybe you know a guy who never uses five words when 50 will do (again, if you can't think of one, then maybe you're him).

These verses are important because they re-center our relationship with God whenever it swings too far to one of two extremes:

Too Familiar

There's no reverence or structure; instead, we worship relationship and comfort. Jesus is my boyfriend; co-pilot; buddy, homeboy, whatever. In this tradition, our praise and worship songs can't be distinguished from a pop song about the musician's latest boyfriend. If the song you sing to God could just as easily be sung to your significant other, then perhaps your relationship with God is too familiar. You've lost respect for who God is.

Too Formal

There's no warmth and relationship; in its place, we worship reverence and rules. Instead of seeing our relationship with Jesus as one of husband/wife (cf. Eph 5), formal religion injects anxiety into the equation—sometimes placing a priest between us and God. The worship service is full of words dictated by a liturgy and long list of readings. Usually, the readings are theologically correct, but the easy temptation is to mindlessly read off the page and then stand or kneel when you're told. Those prayers never get past the ceiling. It's no more respectful than the first error.

Solomon proposes a middle way that merges relationship and reverence and respect: listen more than you talk. Bring your matters to God—of course. But be respectful and think about what you say. Not to sound impressive or eloquent, but to remember your place.

Faith Changes our Character

Our natural tendency is to do what young children want to do when they don't get what they want: whine and complain and argue until we submit and give them what they want. Occasionally, we must be reminded of who the parent is and who the child is.

That's always a hard message for my kids to hear. I completely understand; it's a hard message for me to hear from my Heavenly Father. But as they mature, their character changes and they gradually learn to respectfully take "no" or "later" for an answer.

These are the times when God doesn't show up how we expected Him to. This is the dark valley or desert where we are spiritually thirsty and can't remember the last time we felt God's presence. This is not a request for a truck or a raise; this is an unanswered prayer for a cure or healing or a job. These are the times you're sitting in the dark, feeling alone and abandoned with nothing but grief and tears.

Into all that, Solomon says, "Listen to God."

Of course, our initial response is: "That's the problem. God stopped returning my calls. I haven't heard from Him in 15 months. Can I just get God to do what I want this one time? I'd love to listen if He'd just start talking!"

So, what do you do? How do you listen and pray in the dark valleys and spiritual deserts?

Listening

In regard to listening, you eventually must wrestle with this question: Are the Scriptures true? When the rubber meets the road, what do I trust more: my emotions in this experience, or God's Word?

Few things will take you to that place faster than the death of a loved one. You're left to decide "are they absent from the body and so now present with Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 5)?" Or, since I can't experience their presence right now, does that mean they are gone forever? Resolving the question with faith does not take away the pain. Death isn't natural; we're created to live forever, so every time death shows its ugly head, it hurts in ways we can't even express.

How about a job loss that seems to threaten your family's future, food, shelter, clothing, etc.? Those are *the only times* we really have to decide whether the Bible is reliable: God takes care of the birds, and I'm more important than a bird, so of course I'll get the things I need today.¹² If I didn't get the thing, and I believe the whole thing about God and birds, then the only possible explanation must be that I didn't need the thing today.

What about these verses:

Romans 8:28, 35, 37 (NLT)

²⁸ And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are

¹² See, for example, Matthew 6.26-27.

called according to his purpose for them. ³⁵ Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ³⁷ No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

Now, I don't know how all that works exactly. I can't always line up the colors on Rubik's Cube. But I know this: the humans with the deepest sense of peace are the ones who surrender what they don't know to the God who loves them. Conversely, some of the most miserable, despondent people I know are the ones who can't trust God with what they don't understand.

You see how this kind of faith in the Scriptures produces a person who is unbreakable? Sure, you'll have to bend and sway and get back up as problems keep blowing at you, but once you've settled this question in your mind: *God's Word vs. My Emotions*, there's nothing you can't endure.

Praying

What about prayer? How do you talk to God when you can't remember the last time He talked to you? How do you pray when—if you're honest—you're sure God stopped answering your calls? Solomon would say this: Be Real or Be Silent.

Don't even bother with saying stuff because you think it's what God wants to hear. God wants to hear one thing: the truth. Real, honest prayers are spiritually fertile soil for the

Holy Spirit to work. If you can't tell him the truth, then *for God's sake*, keep your mouth closed. Come back when you're ready to be honest.

"In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart." -John Bunyan

Psalm 13:1 (NLT)

¹ O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way?

God doesn't forget. He can't forget. Still, God doesn't show up and say, "Sorry, Dave. Your prayer is theologically inaccurate. You just earned two more years in the desert."

Regardless of the emotion you're experiencing at any given moment, there is a Psalm that can communicate those emotions to God. Read the Psalms back to God. Alone, depressed, scared, mad, frustrated, worried and anxious? There is a Psalm for that. If you want to talk to God about those feelings but don't know what to say, find the Psalm and read it back to God as your prayer.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 (NLT)

⁴ When you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. ⁵ It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it. ⁶ Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved.

Bargaining with God

One more thing we do when trying to get God to do what we want: we play “Let’s Make a Deal.”

“God, if you give me 2 of these and 4 of those (the blue ones; not the green ones), then I’ll give you 1 of these and 6 of that.”

“If you get me out of this, I’ll become a missionary (in a really bad place); and I’ll hug a tree and recycle my plastic; and I’ll lower my sugar intake; stop saying most of the bad words; only watch one Rated-R movie a month; and, I’ll go to church. A lot.”

“Do we have a deal?”

We’ve all done it. We’ve all tried to bargain with God. Again, Solomon says, “Be careful.” Notice he repeated what’s starting to look like his favorite advice: “Keep your mouth shut. The less words, the better.” Jesus (in Mt 5.37) said, “Just say ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

Don’t be in a hurry to inflate your answer with an oath or some kind of collateral. Those people who need to do that are usually the ones who have a history of dishonesty.

There are a few times when it’s important to take a vow: Getting Married, Becoming a Christian, Enlisting in the Military.

So, how do you approach those vows? Very carefully. Wait, pray, seek guidance and input from trusted people, wait some more, pray more. Then, do it. Make your vow and stick to it. “Don’t delay in keeping your promise.”

Words are Not Deeds

Anyone can say words, but real faith changes our character—not just our vocabulary. If you have to do something that is not pleasant, just do it. Don't delay your obedience with a vow. That's often what a vow or promise is: a stalling tactic to buy us time.¹³

Rather than making a vow to do it later, acknowledge there is not likely to be a good time to do it. That's probably *why* you're trying to talk yourself out of it. So, whatever it is, do it. Don't delay. Don't try to spin it with words into something it's not.

Confess

Pay them back as much as you can

Go on the deployment

Say you're sorry, make it right, put it back together

Eat your vegetables

Just do it. Delayed obedience is disobedience. Sacrifice is not a substitute for obedience. Remember who you are: faith changed your character.

Ecclesiastes 5:7 (NLT)

⁷ Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.

Can I Get God to do What I Want? *Probably* not, no. And, *never* when what you want conflicts with what He wants. If

¹³ I first heard this from a dear friend, Aleric Hebert, recounting a lesson from his dad: "A promise implies a lack of trust." (Hebert, 1995)

your character changed even a little bit after you became a follower of Christ (and it did), you know this is a good thing. I often laugh and cringe at how awful the theology is in country music, but sometimes they get it right:

*... Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs¹⁴*

CONCLUSION

Let's close by letting Jesus ask us one more question, and then He'll show us what right looks like:

Matthew 10:28 (NLT)

²⁸ "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Who or What am I really afraid of?

Who or what am I really serving? Which way are my feet really pointed (cf. Ecc. 5.1a)? Am I afraid of the desert, or my boss, or the dark, or the diagnosis? Or am I *most* afraid of severing my connection with the One Who owns my soul?

Before you say, "Well that was easy for Jesus to say because Jesus *IS* God." Let me remind you of how Jesus spent his final minutes of freedom—just before getting arrested, beaten, nailed to a tree naked, and then

¹⁴ (Alger, Bastian, & Brooks, 1990)

suffocating to death: Pay attention to the words—and the raw honesty—coming from Jesus’ mouth:

Matthew 26:36–46 (NLT)

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, “Sit here while I go over there to pray.” ³⁷ He took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed.

Remember the last time you *knew* something bad was going to happen? Your heart starts to race; your skin gets clammy; your stomach is in knots. That’s what Jesus is experiencing here.

³⁸ He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Ever been so depressed that it took everything you had just to get out of bed and walk across the floor?

³⁹ He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

Did you catch that? Jesus just said, “I want to do my job, but I don’t want to do it like this? Is there any other way than getting nailed to that cross? If so, that’s what I want.”

⁴⁰ Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour?” ⁴¹ Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!”

We've all felt alone and abandoned and deeply hurt by the people we thought would be there for us. Jesus' best friend just chose to sleep rather than stay awake and help Jesus get through this dark night in the valley of the shadow of death.

⁴² Then Jesus left them a second time and prayed, "My Father! If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done."

So, Jesus repeats his request: "God! I'm all alone down here. If you have a Plan B to get me out of here, now is the time."

⁴³ When he returned to them again, he found them sleeping, for they couldn't keep their eyes open. ⁴⁴ So he went to pray a third time, saying the same things again.

⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said, "Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest. But look—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Up, let's be going. Look, my betrayer is here!"

Jesus' friends never came through for him. God never responded to His prayer. So, what did Jesus do? Jesus surrendered His emotions to something far more stable: God's will.



CHAPTER 6.

Why is Money Such a Mystery?

The last thing we heard Solomon say was:

Ecclesiastes 5:7 (NLT)

⁷ Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.

“Fear God” is a term often misunderstood. Consequently, many people get the wrong idea about God: Is He a cosmic warmonger sitting up there throwing thunderbolts at us so we’re hopping around in fear and confusion? Obviously, Solomon doesn’t think of Him that way. Still, he tells us to “fear God.”

As if he anticipates our questions about what this means, Solomon is going to spend the next two and a half chapters explaining what it looks like to “fear God.” If his instructions are followed, today they’ll lead us to joy and contentment.

His instructions on “how to fear God” will lead us to wisdom in our next chapter.

In this chapter, we’re going to be all over Ecclesiastes chapter 5 and chapter 6. In the next chapter, we’ll tackle Ecclesiastes chapter 7. I’ll tell you up front: at this point, Solomon is going straight for our wallet. I think it’s pretty telling that his initial instructions on “how to fear God” are all about money. He dives straight into one of the most personal topics because, well, our relationship with God is deeply personal.

No surprise, Jesus and Solomon are in agreement on this issue:

Matthew 6:21 (NLT)

²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

That’s a pretty-straight forward statement. The Bible is full of straight-forward statements about money. The Bible talks more about money than heaven. Maybe that’s because we often confuse the two? Regardless of the amount of time the Bible spends talking about money, it remains a mystery to many. We think a lot of wrong stuff about money. To include the question, “Why is Money Such a Mystery?”

It certainly doesn’t have to be. Solomon is going to address at least four myths we have about money.

MONEY MYTHS

Ecclesiastes 5:10 (NLT)

¹⁰ Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness!

Myth #1: Money brings satisfaction.

Everybody wants to feel satisfied, and many people think money is the way to get there. “As long as I have enough money to buy enough things, then I’ll be happy.” The problem is that there’s always going to be more things. This forgets a fundamental truth we covered in chapter two: Appetites always come back. Whether we’re dealing with food, sex, or anything else...an appetite is only suppressed for a little while. Once breakfast wears off, you’re going to want lunch. Feeding the appetite isn’t the end of the road. Jesus warns against this:

Luke 12:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ Then he said, “Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.”

Ecclesiastes 5:11 (NLT)

¹¹ The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what good is wealth—except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers!

Myth #2: Money will solve my problems.

Money helps—to be sure. It certainly makes some things easier. After a certain point, the law of diminishing returns kicks in. Many people have discovered the wrong way: more money = more problems. Solomon suggests one of those

problems here: *other* greedy people showing up trying to tell you what to do with *your* money. The myth Solomon is exposing here is: lots of money = lack of problems. We live in a fallen world. It's just not that easy.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 (NLT)

¹² People who work hard sleep well, whether they eat little or much. But the rich seldom get a good night's sleep.

Myth #3: Money brings peace of mind.

"I don't like money, but it quiets my nerves." -Joe Louis

This myth says that my worries and anxieties go down as my bank account goes up. Go ahead and test this theory with your own personal experiences. I'll wait.

My wife and I—like many couples—are in a stronger position financially than when we got married and moved into a 2-room apartment with donated furniture. But, we have no fewer concerns competing for our mind and emotions—no fewer problems to solve. Solomon gives us a blue-collar truth here: if you want a good night's sleep, put in a good day's work. That's more likely to carry you through the night than a fridge full of food.

Ecclesiastes 5:13–15 (NLT)

¹³ There is another serious problem I have seen under the sun. Hoarding riches harms the saver. ¹⁴ Money is put into risky investments that turn sour, and everything is lost. In the end, there is nothing left to pass on to one's children. ¹⁵ We all come to the end of our

lives as naked and empty-handed as on the day we were born. We can't take our riches with us.

Myth #4: Money provides security.

“If I can crack the mystery on how to build a good investment portfolio, then I’m guaranteed to have a comfortable retirement and fully funded education accounts for my kids.” I’m a bit of an investment junkie myself, but I know “Past performance is not an indicator of future success.”

At least two things can go wrong with linking your satisfaction, peace, and security to money:

You can’t predict the market any better than you can predict how long you’re going to live. We do know this: The person who has the most birthdays is the one who lives the longest. We just don’t know how many birthdays we’re each going to have. That’s why Jesus rebuked the guy who kept building more barns to store up all his stuff. “What makes you think you’ll live long enough to pull everything back out of those barns?” (see Luke 12:16-21)

Money is like manure. If you just pile it up, it starts to stink. If you want to benefit from it, then you need to spread it around.

Now, let me ask you a question—“What do you call something that brings you satisfaction, has a solution to your problems, promises complete peace of mind, and provides enduring security?” Answer: god.

If you give money the credit for accomplishing all those things, then you're going to treat it like god. Which is exactly what so many people do. They love money. They make substantial sacrifices for money. They spend all day thinking about money. They chase money with everything they have. In other words, they worship money as their savior. The problem, of course, is that money isn't intended to be worshiped. Money *isn't* god.

Treating money like god is to make an idol out of it. In a book I can't recommend enough¹, Tim Keller explains how idols are counterfeit gods. Our hearts intuitively know that we're sustained by God. That's the reason we rally *everything* we have around whatever we *think* is sustaining us. Too often, that thing is a counterfeit—unable to sustain us. It's an idol *pretending* to be god. We can make an idol out of anything, but money is a good place to start:

Colossians 3:5 (NLT)

⁵ So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.

There's a reason the 1st Commandment says:

Exodus 20:3 (NLT)

³ You must not have any other god but me.

¹ (Keller, 2011)

If God made a rule against worshipping other gods, then it's safe to assume there are other gods out there to be worshiped. Like what? That's the reason for the 2nd Commandment:

Exodus 20:4a (NLT)

⁴ You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind...

“The human heart is an idol factory.”

We're constantly in search of something to worship. There's nothing wrong with that—God made us that way. The problem comes when we find or make something to worship that isn't God. Here's where it gets tricky, so pay attention: we rarely ever pick a bad thing to make an idol out of. On the contrary. The more “good” something is, the more likely we are to think it can sustain us forever—fulfilling our deepest needs and hopes. We do it with our spouses, our kids, our careers, and our bank accounts. Anything can work.

If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol. Approaching it from a different angle: which things make you the most angry, anxious, or depressed? What can control your emotions in an unyielding way? What is so central to who you are that, if you lost it, your life would no longer have meaning? That's what you're worshipping. If it's not Jesus, it's an idol.

To be clear: there are things and people whose loss would throw me into deep sorrow.

Sorrow is what happens to us when we lose a good thing from among others. You could lose a good job, good bank account, God-forbid...even a good relationship, but you would receive comfort and care from the other good things in your life: family, friends, and faith.

Despair is inconsolable. We fall into the pit of despair—where comfort and care can't reach us—when we lose an *ultimate* thing from our life—the thing we thought was sustaining us.

Ecclesiastes 5:17 (NLT)

¹⁷ Throughout their lives, they live under a cloud—frustrated, discouraged, and angry.

This is what happens when we worship something not meant to be worshiped. Whether it's a career, sex, spouse, kid, or money—those things are not designed to be worshiped, so it's not fair to *them* when we worship them. They can't withstand that kind of pressure. It crushes them, and then we fall into despair—without comfort or satisfaction.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 (NLT)

³ A man might have a hundred children and live to be very old. But if he finds no satisfaction in life and doesn't even get a decent burial, it would have been better for him to be born dead.

Typical of Ecclesiastes, that's a heavy statement full of tough love. Solomon doubles down though. When we worship the wrong thing:

Ecclesiastes 6:4–6 (NLT)

⁴ His birth would have been meaningless, and he would have ended in darkness. He wouldn't even have had a name, ⁵ and he would never have seen the sun or known of its existence. Yet he would have had more peace than in growing up to be an unhappy man. ⁶ He might live a thousand years twice over but still not find contentment. And since he must die like everyone else—well, what's the use?

Verse 6 is the result of idolatry—specifically greed. Every day, rich people die unhappy—never understanding the mystery of their discontentment.

Solving the Mystery

How do you avoid all of this? How do we push past the mysterious pull of money and greed over us? We need to understand there are four kinds of people when it comes to money (cf. Prov 30.8-9).

This comes down to two questions:

Q1: How did you get your money?

Q2: How do you use your money?

	Righteous	Unrighteous
Rich	Q1: Work hard Q2: Steward Well	Q1: Dishonest Q2: Greedy, Selfish
Poor	Q1: Work hard Q2: Steward Well	Q1: Lazy Q2: Wasteful, Selfish

Being the righteous kind of person results in this kind of reward:

Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 (NLT)

¹⁸ Even so, I have noticed one thing, at least, that is good. It is good for people to eat, drink, and enjoy their work under the sun during the short life God has given them, and to accept their lot in life. ¹⁹ And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life—this is indeed a gift from God. ²⁰ God keeps such people so busy enjoying life that they take no time to brood over the past.

Verse 20 is what we're all after—contentment. It's what we all want. Our hearts are a radar—constantly seeking this life-sustaining contentment. As we said earlier—God made us that way so that our hearts point us like a compass to Him. However, he left us freedom over how to follow that compass and what to worship.

The problem—specifically for Americans—is that our entire economic system is built on coveting.

"I have a ____, but I want a ____."

The result of that system is:

Ecclesiastes 6:7 (NLT)

⁷ All people spend their lives scratching for food, but they never seem to have enough.

Our whole American way of life is built on a mirage. We're climbing ladders leaning against the wrong buildings.

We're running on treadmills, wondering why we never *arrive* at contentment. It's a big mystery with a simple plot: "One more....one more...one more..." How do we solve the mystery for contentment? Why is money a mystery so often? Here's the key:

Ecclesiastes 6:9 (NLT)

⁹ Enjoy what you have rather than desiring what you don't have. Just dreaming about nice things is meaningless—like chasing the wind.

We need to shift the object of our desire. I learned that from one of the kindest, wisest men I've ever met: a farmer named Bob.

CONCLUSION

Many years ago, one of my mentors (a farmer still going strong after 80+ years) told me he'd always thought the final commandment was the hardest one to keep. "Wanting what we already have rather than trying to have everything we want would sure make it easier to stop breaking the first nine commandments." He'd often add, "Ignoring the first 9 commandments is a sure-fire way to break the last one."²

Bob's wisdom comes into focus when we realize we already have all we need in Christ:

² (Zachrich, 2012)

2 Peter 1:3–4 (NLT)

³ By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.

⁴ And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires.



CHAPTER 7.

What do I do When I Don't Know What to Do?

The wise, old Solomon has been giving us his memoirs. Now, he changes up a bit and starts spouting off seemingly random pieces of wisdom. They're not random though. Taken as a whole, Ecclesiastes 7 represents wide-reaching advice meant to work in all general situations.

So far, he's given us specific, focused commentary on things like: money, sex, possessions, careers, depression, hopelessness, entertainment and recreation, etc. Now, he zooms farther back and paints with a much broader brush. If after reading everything so far, you run into a situation and say, "Ok, but what do I do when I don't know what to

do?” then chapter 7 is full of advice broad enough to work in every situation.

Sometimes, with the best of intentions and wisdom and prayer, we still feel stuck. We have times when we still scratch our head and say, “Nope. I still don’t know where to go from here.” So, “What do I do when I don’t know what to do?” The seventh chapter of Ecclesiastes is here to help us get unstuck so we can continue moving forward.

GETTING AHEAD

Ecclesiastes 7:1–4 (NLT)

¹ A good reputation is more valuable than costly perfume. And the day you die is better than the day you are born. ² Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies— so the living should take this to heart. ³ Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. ⁴ A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time.

A Good Reputation is Better Than Getting Ahead

Perfume was difficult and expensive to maintain, so having some was a status symbol. It communicated: “I’ve arrived. I’m a big deal. Think impressive things about me.” However, Solomon offers this olfactory commentary: what good is that if your reputation stinks?

If—every time your name comes up—people roll their eyes, then have you really accomplished anything? If they

say, “Yeah got promoted, won some awards, but he was a jerk who never helped anyone else.” Then, what good are those awards?

It doesn't matter how many expensive bottles you can afford, the minute you're dead, you're just as poor as a beggar. Once you die, your reputation is all you have. Why is the day you die better than the day you're born? For a believer, death is graduation.

Birth is about potential. Babies and birthdays remind us of the potential we have here on earth. They're great. Death is about fulfillment. Funerals remind us that there is something even better than anything we can build down here on earth.

Solomon is telling us we can learn more from a funeral than a birthday party. The best example of this is Resurrection Sunday. When you compare the two biggest Christian holidays: Christmas and Easter, one is about a birth, the other is about a funeral. There is no conversation to be had regarding which is more important. As followers of Jesus, we are Easter people.

Solomon also tells us we can learn more from sorrow than laughter. If you doubt that, think about the movies we watch. We all like comedies—to be sure. But, which has more of a lingering effect on you after the movie is over—comedy or tragedy?

While nobody likes them at the time, we would all admit: the tragedies in our lives are the moments we've learned, developed, and grown the most. We build a reputation by how we handle tragedies and difficulties. Nobody cares how you act when you're winning. Everybody watches to see how you react to a setback, a loss, or a devastation.

As we said in a previous chapter, those are the only moments when we can truly know if we trust God or not. Wise people know all of this, and their decisions are guided by building the desire to build a solid name. Your name should communicate good things about you. My wife and I tell our kids: "You're Mesaeh kids. That means you act differently."

Why? Because I want them to know their name demands different behavior. Everything you do is building your reputation—for better or worse. When people say or hear your name, what comes to mind?

Ecclesiastes 7:5–6 (NLT)

⁵ Better to be criticized by a wise person than to be praised by a fool. ⁶ A fool's laughter is quickly gone, like thorns crackling in a fire. This also is meaningless.

Correction is Better Than Praise

What do you do when you're lost and get conflicting guidance or directions? Somebody says go left, the other says go right? First, you consider the source: Which of these people *actually* knows this part of town? The same is true

when considering the source(s) of praise or criticism. In other words: don't believe all your own headlines.

The more authority and/or rank you accumulate, the more likely "yes men" are going to be in orbit around you. We tend to surround ourselves with people who tell us what we want to hear.

*"I know you lost your cool, but it's no big deal."
"Nobody's perfect."*

This is why fools tend to run in packs. They just get together and pat each other on the back. Who do you have in your life who tells you the truth you don't want to hear? When's the last time you were given an answer or feedback you didn't like? If you're always the smartest person in the room, you need a bigger room.

Receiving Feedback

How do you get honest feedback? Start by considering: all feedback is helpful. If the feedback is accurate, then you follow it. If it's not accurate, then you need to manage your appearance and perception. Next, it's crucial to thank people for critical feedback. Resist the urge to provide an explanation or defense. Just say thank you. Finally, learn to be the last one to speak. If you don't want to surround yourself with meaningless fools who will let you light yourself on fire, then quietly allow everyone around you to speak before you give your opinion.

Galatians 4:16 (NLT)

¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy because I am telling you the truth?

How do you know if you're getting good, honest feedback? Begin by assessing your conscience. What is it telling you? Assuming you haven't ignored your conscience for so long that it no longer works (cf. 1 Timothy 1:19), it will usually tell you whether you're right or not. God is not in the business of letting his children feel good about doing a bad thing.

More important than your conscience, is the alignment of feedback with God's Word. While our conscience can become susceptible to the effects of living in a fallen world, the Bible remains unchanging—a lighthouse amidst the storm of raging temptations and emotions.

FINISHING IS BETTER THAN STARTING

Ecclesiastes 7:7–9 (NLT)

⁷ Extortion turns wise people into fools, and bribes corrupt the heart. ⁸ Finishing is better than starting. Patience is better than pride. ⁹ Control your temper, for anger labels you a fool.

There's usually plenty of excitement at the beginning of something. Be it a new project, new job, or a new marriage, starting something is fun. But, what matters is finishing those things with integrity. It doesn't matter how big, fancy, and expensive your wedding is. What matters is that you're

still together 50 years later, sitting on the porch holding each other's wrinkled hands.

Solomon shows us at least two things we do when we take our eyes off of a good finish.

We start looking for shortcuts: we either try to force or extort others into doing what we want, or we take bribes to get ahead. The answer is found in verse eight: patience is better than pride. Don't look for shortcuts. Don't try to force your way by breaking the rules, cheating, giving bribes, etc. Instead, lean into your faith and patiently wait for God to bring you to a good finish

If shortcuts don't work, then we become tempted to lose our temper and throw fits—demanding our way. Few things show where our faith really lies than how we respond to not getting what we want. When you're not getting what you want—from your marriage, your job, etc.—when you want it, the answer is found again in verse eight: patience focused on God is better than pride focused on yourself.

A prime example of this truth can be found, again, in Easter. When we compare the two biggest Christian holidays: Christmas and Easter, one is about a beginning; the other is about an ending. Christmas is about potential. Easter is about fulfillment. There's no comparison about which is more important. As believers, we are Easter people! It's all we have to stand on.

Ecclesiastes 7:10 (NLT)

¹⁰ Don't long for "the good old days." This is not wise.

TODAY IS BETTER THAN YESTERDAY

When we become impatient about not getting *what* we want *when* we want it, one of the things we're tempted to say is, "Let's just quit this and go back to the way it was. At least, let's just take a holiday into history and talk about how good things used to be. Do you remember how good it used to be 'back in the day?'"

This mindset is what Solomon decrees "not wise." Do not say, "Remember how good it used to be?" Frequently, churches are susceptible to this nostalgic line of thinking—especially long-established churches full of the "good old days brigade."

Here's the truth: there are no good old days. The good old days are often the product of a bad memory and a good imagination. But, for some reason, we all picture *our generation* as the "golden generation" when everything peaked. "Once this next crazy generation took over, then things went to hell in a hand basket."

Things are not getting worse. People are not getting dumber. Humans are not becoming more evil. We're just more publicized. Everyone carries a television studio in their pocket, and it's connected to a publishing house. Things only feel worse because we see more.

Believers need to hear this: there has been a war on Christmas ever since Herod tried to kill baby Jesus. Three decades later, the church and the government teamed up

to kill the only perfect man to ever live. I think Jesus would disagree with us when we argue: “Things are getting worse.”

Instead of griping about how good it used to be, Christians need to not be paralyzed by the past or hypnotized by the future. Don’t dwell on regret over yesterday or get stuck dreaming about tomorrow. Today is the day. Let’s go. If you get confused about this, ask yourself which direction heaven is. Then go that way.

TWO CLOSING PRINCIPLES

Ecclesiastes 7:13 (NLT)

¹³ Accept the way God does things, for who can straighten what he has made crooked?

A retired umpire was once asked, “Did you ever feel bad about making a bad call?” He didn’t understand, so they clarified: “Did you ever call a ball a strike or a strike a ball?” His answer: “It’s nothing until I call it.”³ That kind of authority is how we need to view God’s role in the events of our life. Arguing with Him over what it is or should be is as useful as arguing with an umpire. Instead, accept the way God does things.

³ This metaphor comes from a Mark Driscoll sermon cited in the Bibliography. (Driscoll, 2015)

Cooperate with the Inevitable

This isn't fatalism. Solomon isn't telling us just to roll over and give up. Not at all! If something is right, then it'll always be right. You should continue doing that right thing until something changes or Jesus comes back. But, when you're asking, "What do I do when I don't know what to do?" Sometimes we need to learn to cooperate with the inevitable.

From chapter three: part of our frustration in life comes when we stop asking what season of life we are in. If you insist on dressing for winter even though it's summer, you can't be surprised when you're uncomfortable. Similarly, when we insist on straightening out something God wants crooked (or vice versa), then we are asking for frustration. Solomon would say:

*Stop looking for a fool to agree with you.
Stop looking for a shortcut or loophole.
Stop throwing a fit when you don't get your way.
Stop saying, "Back in my day..."*

Accept truth. Choose joy.

Instead, get on with it. Maybe you don't know what to do because you're busy denying reality. I had a friend who would often say, "Accept truth. Choose joy."⁴

⁴ (Stockhorst, 2011)

Ecclesiastes 7:14 (NLT)

¹⁴ Enjoy prosperity while you can, but when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. Remember that nothing is certain in this life.

Enjoy what you can, when you can. If it is a good day, then enjoy it. Fly a kite. Cook a steak. Make love to your wife. Turn up the music. Go for a drive. Pet the dog. Enjoy good days. That's what they're there for. Look at the balance from Travis Tritt⁵:

*And it's a great day to be alive
I know the sun's still shining
When I close my eyes
There's some hard times in the neighborhood
But why can't every day be just this good
(It's a Great Day to Be Alive, Travis Tritt)*

If it's a bad day, don't pretend like it's a good day. Mourn. Bring the appropriate sad, mournful emotions into the bad days. Chances are, that bad day isn't your first bad day. Tell yourself: "I've seen this movie before. It's a bad movie. This is a bad day." But also tell yourself: "I know this movie eventually ends." Bad days aren't the only kind of days you have. Remember there are also good days. Today just isn't one of them.

Nobody wants bad days, but everybody gets them. Only entitled people think they should be exempt from bad days.

⁵ (Scott, 2000)

Only a fool thanks God for nice weather and then blames Him for rain. Hundreds of thousands of flights take off and land successfully and safely every day. Nobody praises Jesus for those. When one out of a million has a tragedy, then we shake our fists at God as if He fell asleep on the job.

Remember the advice Job's wife gave him? Their world was falling apart—one bad day after another. Her advice:

Job 2:9 (NLT)

⁹ His wife said to him, "Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die."

In other words: give God the middle finger and then commit suicide. Job's response is a perfect summary of Ecclesiastes 7.14:

Job 2:10 (NLT)

¹⁰ But Job replied, "You talk like a foolish woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?"

This comes down to something we said in chapter five: If you only trust God with what you like and what you understand, then you don't trust God at all. You're only trusting *your* emotions and *your* mind. If you think God should only give you good days since you're a good person, then you need to read the next verse and remember what we did to Jesus:

Ecclesiastes 7:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ I have seen everything in this meaningless life, including the death of good young people and the long life of wicked people.

Do I understand why that verse is true? Absolutely not. My sister represents the death of a good, young person. Almost 20 years ago, she got cancer and died on a Tuesday at the age of 22. That sucks. And I don't understand it.⁶

Does that injustice mean God fell asleep at the wheel? I hope not. A God who makes mistakes is far worse than a God I can't understand. Would I prefer a perfect God whom I'm able to fully comprehend? Maybe, but that's not what I've got. I've got a perfect God who is under no obligation to make sense to me.

If I want peace in this life, I need to learn to cooperate with the inevitable. I need to rejoice on good days and mourn on bad days. I need to accept truth and choose joy.

CONCLUSION

What do you do when you don't know what to do? First, keep this in mind:

⁶ For more on this topic, see my article "Hey Chaplain, I Have Doubts" (Mesaeh, Hey Chaplain, I Have Doubts, 2018)

Romans 13:11 (NLT)

¹¹ This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Regardless of how difficult and confusing life becomes, at least one thing is true: we're getting closer to heaven every day. Time is winding down, and that's a good thing because time is drawing us closer to Jesus.

The next time you find yourself in a cemetery, look at the dates on the tombstones: they're catching up to you.⁷ When you're a kid, those don't mean anything. The older I get, the closer those dates are getting to my dates. That means I'm getting closer to Jesus. Closer to a reunion with my sister and my grandma and a few good friends I've lost along the way.

One way or another: Jesus will come back, or I'll die. Either way, no amount of confusing bad days can change that one fact: my salvation is nearer now than when I first believed.

⁷ This antidote comes from an Alistair Begg sermon cited in the bibliography. (Begg, 1995)



CHAPTER 8.

Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Regardless of our backgrounds or belief systems, one universal truth is the existence of pain. There is a lot of pain in the world—physical, emotional, and spiritual. We feel pain at all levels. There are lots of responses to pain: medication, avoidance, therapy, resistance, etc. These are all attempts to *alleviate* the pain we and our loved ones are feeling.

Another approach to pain is our attempt to explain it. If we can just *understand* where it's coming from and why we're experiencing it, then endurance becomes more possible. Pain hurts, but pain that doesn't make sense is the hardest to carry.

Perhaps the most common, timeless explanation for the source of pain is Karma. No Christian—especially an American Christian—would ever admit to believing in Karma, but it is far more prevalent than we realize. In its most basic form, Karma says “what goes around, comes around.” Karma is the belief that the universe (God, whatever) is always at work to keep the score even. Everything can be reduced to a cause-and-effect relationship based on our actions. Karma says: All of the good and all of the bad is always balancing out to keep things fair.

When good things happen, it’s because you’ve done good in life and now the universe is rewarding you. Equally so, when bad things happen, it’s clearly because you’ve done bad, stored up some bad karma, and now God (or the Universe...whatever) is punishing you.

We even seem to learn in science class that the universe operates this way: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Spiritually speaking, Karma is self-salvation. It’s our attempt to put ourselves in charge of our own destiny—here on earth and eternally. If we can just work hard enough, think pure enough, act good enough, then things will work out.

But—what about when they don’t? We all have stories of working hard, doing all the right things, thinking pure...and still not getting recognized or rewarded. We all believe in Karma when someone we don’t like encounters misfortune of one kind or another. What’s our response?

“Well, she got what was coming to her!”

“Mess with the bull, get the horns, baby!”

However, when hard times fall on us or someone we love, Karma gets replaced with “that’s not fair!” That’s a phrase we don’t need to be taught. Almost instinctively, we have something inside us that *thinks* things should be fair. So, when they’re not, it only intensifies our pain. And this is the problem with Karma—in spite of how tightly we hold to the notion of justice, and balance, and fairness, sometimes life’s just *not* fair. This is what Solomon is going to explore next:

Ecclesiastes 7:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ I have seen everything in this meaningless life, including the death of good young people and the long life of wicked people.

When we observe this: good people dying young and bad people growing old, we ask the infamous question: Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People? If we believe in God, we get mad and shake our fists at Him. This is understandable. If God was able to stop the pain but didn’t, then we want to know why. Our hearts are still aligned with Karma. Karma is the basis for even asking this question: “Wait...what? Bad things to *good* people?” In that sense, faith in God can make pain worse—not better.

The atheist position makes it harder to reconcile Karma with unfair, unexplainable suffering. If there’s a God, then you can at least blame Him. If there’s no God to shake your fist at, then there’s no basis for expecting fairness. If there’s no God or controlling power in the universe, then there’s

nothing to make sure things end up “fair.” In that case, everything just comes down to chance or survival. “Fair and balanced” has nothing to do with it.

So, whether we believe in God or not, our hearts tell us Karma is too simplistic. It simply doesn’t have the resources to help us make sense of pain in a way that’ll carry us through. This is what Solomon is going to unpack. But first...

I want to give you an equation; write this down:

Contentment = Expectation – Reality.

As long as this equation balances out to at least “zero,” then we’re content. If we expected to get off work at 4:30, and we actually got off work at 4:30 = content. If we got off earlier than expected, then we’re happy! If we had to work later than expected, then we’re leaving work at 5:30 pretty unhappy.

If things are better than we expected, we’re happy. If we expected something bigger, better, or prettier than we got, then we’re sad.

So what? What’s this got to do with anything? If you always expect things to be fair, then sometimes—often—you’re going to be frustrated. This is why Karma is so dangerous. Karma is dangerous because it gives us a false expectation of instant, self-correcting justice and order and fairness. Reality, however, just doesn’t support this. Our world isn’t always orderly; sometimes it’s just pure chaos out there. It’s certainly not always just and fair. Good people die young, bad people grow old, all of the tasty food makes you fat, and healthy food tastes like cardboard.

Karma is a broken, smudged, dirty set of glasses that we insist on looking through to view the world around us. So, Solomon takes us on a journey to fix and clean the lenses. He leads us through his personal path of exploration to arrive at a clearer, more accurate version of how the world really works. His goal is to show us: Karma doesn't work; it's not the way things operate, and there's something much better anyway.

A BETTER WAY

Ecclesiastes 7:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ I have seen everything in this meaningless life, including the death of good young people and the long life of wicked people.

Verse 15 simply says: there's no such thing as Karma; life's not fair, so...

Ecclesiastes 7:16–18 (NLT)

¹⁶ So don't be too good or too wise! Why destroy yourself? ¹⁷ On the other hand, don't be too wicked either. Don't be a fool! Why die before your time? ¹⁸ Pay attention to these instructions, for anyone who fears God will avoid both extremes.

Don't be self-righteous (v.16) or willfully sinful and wicked (v. 17). Don't reduce life down to something you can earn through goodness and morality or create through indulgent corruption and debauchery. Stay away from either of these extremes (v. 18).

We see examples of both extremes in Jesus' story about the Prodigal Son. The older thought he could be extremely righteous and win his father's love and approval. The younger decided to create his own life through reckless (prodigal) self-indulgence. Neither of those extremes work: despite Karma's teaching, we are *not* in charge of our own destiny. Sure, we have obligations and responsibilities, but fulfilling all of them still may not produce the outcome we expect. And, just in case we're still holding on to the illusion that we can—through Karma—force God's hand into giving us what we want, Solomon lets the air out of that balloon:

Ecclesiastes 7:20–22 (NLT)

²⁰ Not a single person on earth is always good and never sins. ²¹ Don't eavesdrop on others—you may hear your servant curse you. ²² For you know how often you yourself have cursed others.

You and I fall under “not a single person on earth,” so we've already forfeited the moral high ground. And (v.21) don't try to dig up dirt on your neighbor to prove: “at least I'm better than her.” That's just going to disappoint you too. She's been doing the same thing you've been doing, so the gossip-eavesdrop-gossip cycle is just going to leave you with a bitter taste of your own medicine.

So, Karma doesn't work; it turns out life's not going to be fair. It also turns out I'm not as good and moral as I thought I was, so I'm not going to earn what I'm looking for. But I can't simply resort to lawlessness and self-indulgence: that'll kill me in the end.

Solomon continues journaling about his frustration:

Ecclesiastes 7:23–25 (NLT)

²³ I have always tried my best to let wisdom guide my thoughts and actions. I said to myself, “I am determined to be wise.” But it didn’t work. ²⁴ Wisdom is always distant and difficult to find. ²⁵ I searched everywhere, determined to find wisdom and to understand the reason for things. I was determined to prove to myself that wickedness is stupid and that foolishness is madness.

Solomon is still determined to figure out how the world works and to arrive at some sort of explanation for why the events of our lives unfold the way they do, but he tells us in the next verse what he discovered instead:

Ecclesiastes 7:26 (NLT)

²⁶ I discovered that a seductive woman is a trap more bitter than death. Her passion is a snare, and her soft hands are chains. Those who are pleasing to God will escape her, but sinners will be caught in her snare.

In other words, while trying to be philosophical and intellectual about right and wrong, good and evil; while trying to put together a manual of all the “wicked foolishness” we should avoid, Solomon gets snared in a wicked trap himself. Actually, Solomon gets caught (again) in his favorite trap of all—women.

Solomon had woman issues. How do we know? The 700 wives and another 300 live-in girlfriends kind of gives him away. If you’re burning through that many women, that makes *you* the least common denominator. If you have to

keep tossing people aside because you can't find one that suits you, it's safe to say you're the one with the problem.

So, while we're talking about Solomon's favorite trap to get caught in, it's worth stopping to ask, "What's yours?" Which bait are you most often looking for—even though you know Satan's only using it to hide the hook? We all have a bait (or two) that our enemy knows he can use without too much effort. So, what is it for you? What tempts you to lower your defenses, unlock the doors, put down the weapons, and just invite the enemy right inside?

After a detour of ranting against his favorite sin, Solomon starts to draw some conclusions and suggest a way forward.

Ecclesiastes 7:27 (NLT)

²⁷ "This is my conclusion," says the Teacher. "I discovered this after looking at the matter from every possible angle.

After looking for a wise explanation for why things happen the way they do, the wisest man to ever live says:

Ecclesiastes 7:28–29 (NLT)

²⁸ Though I have searched repeatedly, I have not found what I was looking for. Only one out of a thousand men is virtuous, but not one woman! ²⁹ But I did find this: God created people to be virtuous, but they have each turned to follow their own downward path."

This is hyperbole; Solomon is exaggerating for effect. He's not anti-women; we already established that. And, in his other books (especially Proverbs), he has high praise for

women. What he's saying is this: After spending a lifetime searching for a way to understand pain—your pain and my pain; after trying to figure out a reason for why the world works the way it does, and after searching for a roadmap and some instructions we can all follow to make life fair, and predictable, and orderly..."I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

If nothing else, he concludes that people just don't act the way they should. God created us to act one way, but all too often, we act another. Sure—there are bright spots when we do good for one another. But there are many other examples where we come up short. Even the best of people—who genuinely care about you and your wellbeing—will fail you from time to time. Before you get all idealistic and offer up your favorite human as an exception to this, remember that it's written by the wisest man who ever lived.

Further down he writes:

Ecclesiastes 8:9–11 (NLT)

⁹ I have thought deeply about all that goes on here under the sun, where people have the power to hurt each other. ¹⁰ I have seen wicked people buried with honor. Yet they were the very ones who frequented the Temple and are now praised in the same city where they committed their crimes! This, too, is meaningless.

¹¹ When a crime is not punished quickly, people feel it is safe to do wrong.

Here Solomon is talking about our favorite humans—the ones we bury with honor. Sometimes we even change our

calendars and give our most favorite humans a special holiday devoted just to remembering how great they were. Solomon says they frequented the Temple, went to church, gave great speeches in the same city where they committed their crimes and got away with it.

I don't want to give examples of the heroes we give holidays to because you might think I'm being political. I'm not. Solomon is just saying that the world we live in is not fair, and even the very best among us will fail us from time to time. Many of them will get away with it too.

So don't put anybody on a pedestal of perfection. They'll fall off. Be careful about creating heroes with holidays. If we look closely enough, they'll disappoint us.

This isn't pessimism; it's reality. It's the way the world *actually* works. Solomon is taking the glasses off our face and cleaning the lenses to show us: in the real world, nobody can really earn high praise or celebrity status: we're all sinners. In the real world, nobody can create a content life of self-indulgence: we all have insatiable appetites.

The Way Forward

So what? What do we do in a fallen, broken world where people have the power to hurt each other?

Ecclesiastes 8:2-4 (NLT)

² Obey the king since you vowed to God that you would.

³ Don't try to avoid doing your duty, and don't stand with those who plot evil, for the king can do whatever he

wants.⁴ His command is backed by great power. No one can resist or question it.

First, realize you're not the final authority over you and your life. Everyone has a boss. Everyone—whether they realize it or not—is under authority. We don't live with anarchy or chaos or lawlessness. Who in your life right now is able to tell you 'no'? Who do you listen to? Who do you obey? If you can't come up with a quick, clear answer, then there's at least one problem.

Solomon's second piece of guidance:

Ecclesiastes 8:5–6 (NLT)

⁵ Those who obey him will not be punished. Those who are wise will find a time and a way to do what is right,⁶ for there is a time and a way for everything, even when a person is in trouble.

Do your duty and follow the conscience God gave you. However, that may not exempt you from the consequences of a conscience in conflict with those around you.

Fair? Nope. Reality? Yes.

That unfair reality is why these final verses of chapter 8 are so important:

Ecclesiastes 8:12–13 (NLT)

¹² But even though a person sins a hundred times and still lives a long time, I know that those who fear God will be better off. ¹³ The wicked will not prosper, for they do not fear God. Their days will never grow long like the evening shadows.

If you're keeping score horizontally—by looking around at who's getting ahead, who's being hurt and oppressed, who has the power and who doesn't—then it's never going to add up. It'll always appear to be unfair—fully of bad people living long, seemingly happy lives. But, if Solomon has said it once he's said it 100 times: the key to living your life well is realizing it won't last forever.

All our perspective is “under the sun,” but God is keeping score *vertically*. He sits *over* the sun, and justice belongs to Him—not to karma, or the Universe, or you, or me. This is good news because if justice was up to me, and someone hurt my family, I'd be doing prison ministry from the inside. And so, one more time for good measure:

Ecclesiastes 8:14 (NLT)

¹⁴ And this is not all that is meaningless in our world. In this life, good people are often treated as though they were wicked, and wicked people are often treated as though they were good. This is so meaningless!

Like a bookend at the beginning and end of Solomon's journaling, he crushes the concept of karma. He crushes our expectation that good things happen only to good people and bad things are reserved for communists and cat-lovers. Along with that, he crushes the very basis for asking this week's question: Why do bad things happen to good people?

This is another one of those times we need to take notice of what Solomon doesn't say. He never answers this question. He acknowledges it at least twice: “Yes. Bad things do happen to good people.” Then he moves on to something else we'll discuss in the next chapter.

It just further reminds us: Ecclesiastes is a book about survival, not solutions. In our effort to find all the solutions, Solomon points out:

Ecclesiastes 8:16 (NLT)

¹⁶ In my search for wisdom and in my observation of people's burdens here on earth, I discovered that there is ceaseless activity, day and night.

We're wearing ourselves out trying to have all the answers, right all the wrongs, do all the good, earn all the promotions, fix all the problems, assemble all the puzzles. When in reality:

Ecclesiastes 8:17–9:1 (NLT)

¹⁷ I realized that no one can discover everything God is doing under the sun. Not even the wisest people discover everything, no matter what they claim. ¹ This, too, I carefully explored: Even though the actions of godly and wise people are in God's hands, no one knows whether God will show them favor.

CONCLUSION

So, if we can't resolve all of this, what do we do? What does Solomon prescribe?

Ecclesiastes 8:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ So I recommend having fun, because there is nothing better for people in this world than to eat, drink, and enjoy life. That way they will experience some happiness along with all the hard work God gives them under the sun.

I like this plan. Friends—we can do this! How does Solomon respond to our ceaseless activity and never-ending search for answers? Go home, have a BBQ and watch some TV.

This is an act of faith.

Because while other people are wearing themselves out with ceaseless activity trying to do stuff only God can do, you're doing what you can in faith and then going home in faith to trust God with the rest. This is an act of faith. Working and worrying and stressing as if every job, every relationship, every problem, every injustice relied on you...there's no faith in that. If anything, it's faith in yourself. That's not a good idea. You know that because you know you.

Instead, go home. Take your pants off, eat, drink, watch the Colts game. It's an act of faith. God is in control, and He'll make sure things work out.

The Real Reason

But, do you know the *real* reason you don't do this? It's not because you're afraid your enemies won't receive the justice they deserve. It's not because you're afraid your loved ones won't receive the goodness and mercy they deserve.

The real reason you don't just sit down, relax, and enjoy life...It's because you're afraid *you* don't deserve this kind of peace.

You're afraid—if God's keeping score—things won't add up in your favor. So, it's ceaseless activity and worrying and questioning and anxiety. You're trying to outrun God's justice...hoping that all your activity and anxiety will result in some good karma.

You'd never call it that, of course. But that's exactly what it is.

Let me ask you a question: If you had to pick, do you think God likes *you*, or a *future*, cleaner version of you? Is God happy with you right now? *Before* you get up and go fix the next problem on your list?

If you think God likes you right now, then why? On what basis? If you're ever going to have any peace or contentment, the only acceptable answer to that question is: Jesus.

Because the truth is, you're right: you don't deserve peace or goodness or mercy. You and I don't keep God's standards. Heck—even if you don't believe in God, you have standards of your own you don't keep. It kind of looks like this:

Ephesians 2:1–3 (NLT)

¹ Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ² You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³ All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

Then, one of the most powerful statements in the whole Bible:

Ephesians 2:4 (NLT)

⁴ But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much,

It doesn't say, "But, Bill..."

Ephesians 2:5-6 (NLT)

⁵ that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ⁶ For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.

Who put us there? Did it have anything to do with your ceaseless activity and anxiety? No. Why did God do it?

Ephesians 2:7 (NLT)

⁷ So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

Why? So He could brag about how much Jesus accomplished. Afraid you have a bunch of "bad Karma" (sin debt) stored up? That's probably warranted. We can all be creative when it comes to sin. But what does Paul say about people like that? Like you and like me? God just points to us and says, "Yeah: that guy was really messed up. But look

at what I did with Him!" I'll give Paul the last word. I have these two verses tattooed on my arm:

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)

⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.



CHAPTER 9.

Death—What’s the Point?

In the previous chapter, Solomon addressed the question: Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People? The verse we stopped on (9.1) summarizes the whole discussion:

Ecclesiastes 9:1 (NLT)

¹This, too, I carefully explored: Even though the actions of godly and wise people are in God’s hands, no one knows whether God will show them favor.

Through half of chapter 7 and all of chapter 8, Solomon pushes back against the idea of “Christian Karma.”¹ It’s even worse when it’s packaged and peddled as Christian

¹ To summarize the previous chapter: “What’s goes around, comes around” isn’t biblical.

teaching: If you have enough faith and serve God well enough, He will bless you with health and wealth and increase your territory and let you 'live your best life now' so 'everyday feels like a Friday.' That kind of talk makes me want to vomit.

To be frank, I hate it.

My biggest problem with it would be, well, the Bible. John the Baptist was faithful, and he got his head cut off. That's the opposite of having your territory expanded. Jeremiah gets beat up naked and thrown in a ditch, Moses never entered the promised land, and Jesus is beat half to death before being nailed to a tree where he suffocated to death. The message of the Bible is not "if you're faithful, God will love you and bless you with food, trinkets, and long life."

The gospel is: Jesus is enough—regardless of the circumstance or season of life.

In other words: (and please listen to me) We cannot look to our circumstances for an accurate reading of whether we are in God's will or not.

We can't look around at what's going on in our life to determine whether God is blessing us or not. If we can know that, then it has to come from somewhere else.

Matthew 5:45 (NLT)

⁴⁵In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

Now, if you're thinking: "well, that's frustrating and confusing." Solomon would agree. Yes, it is. Reading Solomon's "end of life memoirs" (that's what Ecclesiastes is), you can smell the frustration. If you look at 9.1, you can see the tension. Read this with me again, and pay attention to the tension:

Ecclesiastes 9:1 (NLT)

¹This, too, I carefully explored: Even though the actions of godly and wise people are in God's hands, no one knows whether God will show them favor.

See it? Solomon is acknowledging the frustration of being good, and still not having life play out the way you'd like. But, at the same time—and please don't miss this—he never denies God's providence.

Providence: Nothing gets to you that hasn't passed through God's hands.

Providence: God never says, "Hmm. I wasn't expecting this. Let's think. What's going on?"

Solomon doesn't say, "God let's bad things happen to good people, so God must not be in control." But much to our frustration, Solomon also doesn't solve the riddle. He just lets it sit there unsolved. If anything, he adds to it; that's what we're going to cover in this chapter. If you want more proof that we can't look around at our *life* to figure out God's plan, Solomon says, consider *death* as well. That's also not an indicator of whether or not God favors you.

DESTINY

Ecclesiastes 9:2 (NLT)

²The same destiny ultimately awaits everyone, whether righteous or wicked, good or bad, ceremonially clean or unclean, religious or irreligious. Good people receive the same treatment as sinners, and people who make promises to God are treated like people who don't.

We are now at the crescendo of Solomon's discourse on futility. He's going to unpack the topic we most want to avoid, run from, and ignore: death. Instead of discussing it head-on: "She died." We try to sanitize it with dainty terms like "passed away," "moved on," "fell asleep," and "went to a better place," etc.

"I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." -Woody Allen

Here's what the Bible wants us to know about death: Death is not an accident. It's an appointment.

Death is Unavoidable

Solomon is just stating the obvious: Death is Unavoidable

Hebrews 9:27 (NLT)

²⁷And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment,

So today Solomon addresses death head on. He's not trying to make us feel better about it or convince us that we shouldn't be sad when our loved ones die. No. Death—

while an inevitable appointment—is still a cancer on our souls. We were not designed to die, so death will never feel “ok” or “acceptable.” Death is our enemy, but it is the last enemy we’ll ever have to face.

The question for chapter nine is this: Death—What’s the point?

There seems to be this idea (and I don’t disagree) that if you and I knew the date/time of our death, then we would live our lives differently. We’d be more intentional about the way we spend our time and the kinds of things we allow ourselves to think about and say to other people.

*"I was in my early forties
With a lot of life before me
And a moment came that stopped me on a dime
I spent most of the next days
Looking at the x-rays
Talkin' 'bout the options
And talkin' 'bout sweet time"
I asked him
"When it sank in
That this might really be the real end
How's it hit you
When you get that kind of news?"*

*He said
"I was finally the husband
That most of the time I wasn't
And I became a friend a friend would like to have
And all of a sudden going fishin'
Wasn't such an imposition*

*And I went three times that year I lost my dad
I finally read the Good Book, and I
Took a good, long, hard look
At what I'd do if I could do it all again²*

Solomon seems to accept this: the reality of death has an impact on the way we live our life. Depending on your worldview—especially what you think about God—life is either meaningless or meaningful. Either way, death doesn't create problems. It reveals them.

Solomon is going to show us: the point of death is to force us to decide whether life will be meaningless or meaningful.

Life is Meaningless

First, he addresses the “meaningless” approach.

Ecclesiastes 9:3 (NLT)

³It seems so wrong that everyone under the sun suffers the same fate. Already twisted by evil, people choose their own mad course, for they have no hope. There is nothing ahead but death anyway.

From a pastor's perspective (with a front row seat to people dealing with death): the reality of it—when you're finally forced to come to grips with your mortality or the mortality of your loved ones—either brings out the best in you, or the worst. Too often, it's the worst.

² (Nichols & Wiseman, 2004)

Death is like an x-ray letting us see into our hearts. We can either become generous and giving, or we fight over our loved one's trinkets.

"He wanted me to have this, so I'm never going to speak to you again."

When it comes to *our own* death, if we think life is meaningless, we'll do anything other than repent to deal with it. Let me say that again: the way you *actually* live your life tells you what you think about death. It's not what you *say* about God. It's the actions and follow-through that reveal your heart.

"You only believe the parts of the Bible you do."³
– Rick Warren

Jesus' entire teaching can be summed up in this verse:

Matthew 3:2 (NLT)

²"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

Looking back on your own life: the things you do and the way you respond to yourself and others, is it a life marked by repentance?

When you're wrong, do you say so? (or do you just get angry and emotional—making it about you rather than the ones you've hurt?)

³ (Warren, 2010)

*When you can help, do you? (or do you give an excuse about why you can cross the street and walk on by?)
When people see your life, do they see one that loves God and loves people? (or do they see one that's marked by selfish ambition and self-interest?)*

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Your own actions will tell you whether you believe Jesus on this issue or not.

Now, reaching the depth of his commentary on hopelessness, Solomon utters what are probably the most depressing words of the entire book:

Ecclesiastes 9:4–6 (NLT)

⁴There is hope only for the living. As they say, "It's better to be a live dog than a dead lion!" ⁵The living at least know they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, nor are they remembered. ⁶Whatever they did in their lifetime—loving, hating, envying—is all long gone. They no longer play a part in anything here on earth.

These words—as depressing as they sound—are true. Solomon is saying true things here. But depending on where you stand on our question (What's the whole point of death?): is life meaningless or meaningful, these true words may not tell the whole story of your existence.

Let's break these verses down, starting with acknowledging: the older people get, the less they bother with using a filter or sugar-coating their words? Solomon is the epitome of that. He's lived a long life, and he just doesn't

care whether you're going to invite him over for dinner or not. He's learned a few vital things about life, and he gives them to us here straight and without mincing his words.

First, he's telling us that everyone's eternal fate is sealed at death. The moment you exhale your last breath, you have a permanent reservation in either heaven or hell. If you don't like hell, then don't go there. There's a way around it. We'll get back to that.

What Solomon is saying is simple: when you're dead, you can no longer repent. The time to do that one vital action is while you're alive.

Next, in v. 4, he tells us that dogs are better than cats.

In v. 5, he gives another simple truth: one day you're going to die. We're going to dress you up, put some makeup on your face, put you in a box, stare at you, put the box in the ground, and then go back to the church to eat potato salad and talk about you all the while thinking about the next thing we have to rush off to.

Eventually, the two or three generations who had contact with you will die also. At that point, nobody will be left on earth to remember you, so you'll be forgotten. Furthermore, in v. 6, not only will death remove all opportunities to affect your eternity, but it will also remove all opportunities to impact life down here on earth. The dead can't continue loving, hating, hugging, or apologizing. Only the living can do that.

So, in summary, Solomon is telling us to “make it count.”
Look at the ESV for v. 6 again:

Ecclesiastes 9:6 (ESV)

⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

For better or worse, you’re going to spend a lot of time on earth loving, hating, and being jealous. Solomon wants us to pause and ask, “Am I spending my emotions in the right way?”

Whose affection are you trying to win right now? How’s that working for you?

Who are you mad at right now? Is that anger helping you, or hurting you?

How much time do you spend wanting what you don’t have? Is that keeping you from enjoying what you do have?

Make it count. If you’re going to expel emotions and energy, then do so on purpose. Do it in a way consistent with someone who believes that life on earth is not all there is.

Solomon says: when you die, you no longer take part in things under the sun. The fact that he makes this distinction should make us ask, “What about *over* the sun?”

If God is to be believed, when you die, you don’t stop being you. That’s because you don’t *have* a soul. You *are* a soul with this broken-down body stapled to it. The body isn’t designed to live forever (hence, death), but the soul is. It just keeps on going after the body falls off—and (this is my point)

it keeps on going as the sum of the decisions you made on earth, under the sun. All that loving, hating, and envying is making you into a very specific kind of soul. The question is: are you crafting the kind of soul you want to be for eternity?

Life is Meaningful

At this point Solomon shifts from the “life is meaningless” view and shows us how death makes life meaningful. In short, he’s going to tell us this: If you want to live a life that can only be improved by death, then live your life like it is practice for heaven.

Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 (NLT)

⁷So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this!

⁸Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne! ⁹Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you under the sun. The wife God gives you is your reward for all your earthly toil. ¹⁰Whatever you do, do well. For when you go to the grave, there will be no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom.

Solomon’s prescription (it’s worth pointing out: “Go” is grammatically written as a *command*. Solomon isn’t suggesting here. He’s giving a directive to the living believer. You *will*...):

V.7: Have joyful, leisurely celebrations with family and friends. Eat good food & drink good wine.

V.8: Get dressed up in something nice that has buttons and a collar. Clean up and smell good.

*V.9: Embrace your spouse and enjoy that relationship.
V10: Work really hard to be really good at something.
Make your labor a contribution.*

Contrast this with contemporary values and lifestyles:

Fast food in your car as you rush from one place to another.

Throw on some sweatpants or pajamas and a ballcap to hide the 3-day bath.

Have casual sex and live-in relationships—love the one you're with.

Be lazy and half-hearted--cheat if you can; go through life with as little effort as possible.

I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase⁴ of these verses:

Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 (The Message)

⁷⁻¹⁰Seize life! Eat bread with gusto,

Drink wine with a robust heart.

Oh yes—God takes pleasure in *your* pleasure!

Dress festively every morning.

Don't skimp on colors and scarves.

Relish life with the spouse you love

Each and every day of your precarious life.

Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange

For the hard work of staying alive.

Make the most of each one!

Whatever turns up, grab it and do it. And heartily!

This is your last and only chance at it,

⁴ (Peterson, 2002)

If you didn't notice, this paints a different version of God and heaven than the one many of you may have grown up with: We often think of God as a cosmic killjoy with a taser: "Go to church, or I'll kill all of you!" Sing worship songs all day and don't smile, or God will know. Turn down the radio.

This is extremely practical guidance. My wife and I experienced the joy of this first-hand when we went to Rome for our anniversary: We got up, put on nice clothes, had a leisurely breakfast, slowly meandered around the city until mid-afternoon, went back to the room for a nap, got up and put on even nicer clothes, and went back out for an evening of good food, good wine (for her; I had good beer because...merica).

Don't miss the point: the things on Solomon's prescription can be enjoyed regardless of your season of life. There were times in our marriage when a good meal was hamburger helper & root beer. Wealth is not having nice things to enjoy. Wealth is enjoying the things you have.

Life is Unpredictable

Solomon is trying to force us into a decision: will your *death* make your *life* meaningless or meaningful? To do that, he just told us how Death is Unavoidable. To further force the question, now he's going to show us how unpredictable life is.

Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 (NLT)

¹¹I have observed something else under the sun. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The

wise sometimes go hungry, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. ¹²People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy.

Previously, he's been telling us that our circumstances are no indication of God's favor. We can't look at what we're going through to determine if we're in God's will or not. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Now, he's telling us (in typical cranky, senior citizen fashion): your personal abilities are no indicator of the success you're going to have, or the amount of time left on earth.⁵

Here's what he wants us to know: Life on earth is not a riddle you can solve. Is that unsettling? Frustrating? Sometimes depressing? Yes. Still, it's true.

Just like you, I wish I always knew which lever to pull that would fix the weather and heal my kids' colds. I wish I knew which button to push that would put the wind at my back, keep my favorite shoes from wearing out, and make the people around me smell nice. I wish I knew the words to say

⁵ He'll go on in w. 13-18 to tell a story that illustrates this; for the sake of time, we won't go there.

that would take the pain away. So do you. But, sometimes, we just don't know how to do those things.

The wisest people are the ones willing to admit their ignorance. There's nothing worse than the college sophomore who's read a few books and now knows it all. I know. I used to be him. But the older I get and the more I know, the more I realize how little I know.

Survival, not Solutions

So, what do we do? First, remember that Ecclesiastes is a survival book, not a solution manual. It's not a book we read until we have all the answers. It's a book that tells us how to live faithfully amid all this confusion and chaos and frustration.

It's a book we read to remind us how much we *don't* know. That's supposed to drive us to put more faith in the God who does. Solomon is working to disassemble our faith in ourselves so we can put that faith in God instead.

He says it beautifully in another book he wrote:

Proverbs 3:5 (NLT)

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart;
do not depend on your own understanding.



CHAPTER 10.

How do I Finish Well?

Ecclesiastes is the personal memoirs of the wisest, most successful man who ever lived. It's a poetic autobiography that allows us to peak behind the curtain and learn from all of the mistakes we wish we could make: Sex, Money, Pleasure, Real Estate, Self-Indulgence, Power, More Money, etc.

Solomon has taken us on a journey into the heart of every person who's ever lived. He gave commentary on the questions we think but think we shouldn't think:

Is There Life Before Death?

Should I Feel Bad for Feeling Good?

Why Does Life Feel so Hard?

How do I Stay Alive When I Feel so Alone?

Can I Get God to do What I Want?

Why is Money Such a Mystery?

What do I Do When I Don't Know What to Do?

Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Death—What's the Point?

How do I Finish Well?

Now, he's going to close his letter with a few principles for living your life well all the way to the end. He's already told us we can't avoid death, so if you want good things said about you at your funeral, this is what you do. You can't avoid being the subject of lies and slander; some people are just going to gossip. If you want others to shut that gossip down and defend you in your absence, Solomon offers the below principles.

PRINCIPLES

Ecclesiastes 10:2–3 (NLT)

²A wise person chooses the right road; a fool takes the wrong one. ³You can identify fools just by the way they walk down the street!

Don't be Stupid

This is not a given; it needs to be said. It's not about IQ; Solomon is not being mean. Rather, he is saying that you can tell someone is a fool just by the way they carry themselves. Not just physically, but in temperament and personality. You can usually tell within 2 minutes of talking to someone whether they have a wise, learning, sincere posture, or whether they've already learned everything the world has to teach them, and now they exist simply to bless

you with their insight—if only you'd stop talking and allow them to say more words.

If you want to finish life well, don't be stupid. Don't be a fool. Listen more than you talk. Be humble. Ask more questions. Give fewer answers. Talk less, think more.

Here's what Solomon would say helps: when it comes down to you and God, remember which one of you is the creator of the universe.

That's not sarcasm. Return to it every chance you get. Solomon told us countless times in this book: God has the answers; we don't. We fight against that to our own peril.

If you're big, God can't be. Do you really want to be bigger than God? I can't imagine anything scarier than that.

Here are two practical questions to determine whether you're a fool or not:

How do you feel when you stand next to other people?

Are you there to serve them, or are they there to serve you? Are you building your self-esteem off of them, or are you there to encourage them?

How do you feel when you stand next to the ocean?

Does the size and majesty and mystery of the universe remind you that you are the created, not the creator? The awesomeness of God should put us in our place; only a fool ignores that.

Job 38:4 (NLT)

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.

Work Smarter, not Harder

Ecclesiastes 10:10 (NLT)

¹⁰Using a dull ax requires great strength, so sharpen the blade. That’s the value of wisdom; it helps you succeed.

There is nothing wise or holy about working harder than you must. Being busy doesn’t make you productive or helpful. At some point, “busy” became the standard for success.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m busy. Busy, busy, busy. “Look how important I am. I’m very busy.”

Working smarter rather than harder means taking time to sharpen your axe. There’s nothing good about pounding away at trees with a dull blade. So, what does it look like to sharpen your axe?

It means working *on* your life, not just in it. If you want to enjoy living in your marriage, spend some time working on it. Get some feedback, listen to it, don’t defend yourself, then go off to work on your life. Develop better people skills. Spend time learning about God and what He wants for your life. Learn your spouse’s love language so you can love her or him on purpose. Rest. Sabbath, regularly so you’re not running around on an empty tank.

Don't be Lazy

Ecclesiastes 10:15–18 (NLT)

¹⁵ Fools are so exhausted by a little work that they can't even find their way home. ¹⁶ What sorrow for the land ruled by a servant, the land whose leaders feast in the morning. ¹⁷ Happy is the land whose king is a noble leader and whose leaders feast at the proper time to gain strength for their work, not to get drunk. ¹⁸ Laziness leads to a sagging roof; idleness leads to a leaky house.

How do you finish well? By not allowing laziness to take you over. Don't be lazy.

This is not about being busy for the sake of being busy. We just covered that. Rather, this is about staying engaged. It's about asking yourself, "Am I doing the best I can with what I have?"

This is one of those deceptive issues where we need to ask ourselves twice. "Am I working hard and producing the best I can with what I have? Am I really?" I had a teacher in high school who would always tell us to ask ourselves, "Would I pay myself for the work I just submitted? Did I just earn my check?"¹

The truth is: nobody owes you anything. An entitlement mentality leads to a sagging roof and a leaky house. Your own experience testifies to this: on average, we feel better

¹ (Evola, 1997)

after a good, hard day of work than we do after a day of sitting around being idle.

I'm not talking about a lazy Saturday. Sabbath is important. I'm talking about: it's Wednesday at 2pm and you've been in your pajamas since Saturday. We feel best when we work because we were made to work. Without meaningful work, we're like a truck with nothing in the back: It's hard to drive and control because it's not doing what it's built to do.

We were built to work. Adam had work to do in the Garden *before* he got kicked out. Work itself isn't punishment. Work is your way to engage the world with the gifts God gave you. Notice Solomon says the point of feasting is to prepare you for work. Eat and drink. Go for it but do it so you can recharge and come back ready to do more work. Don't feast to avoid work; feast so you can be better engaged.

Ecclesiastes 11:1–2 (NLT)

¹ Send your grain across the seas, and in time, profits will flow back to you. ² But divide your investments among many places, for you do not know what risks might lie ahead.

Make Good Money Decisions

How do you finish well? Be smart with your money. Make good money decisions. Ecclesiastes is telling us to diversify our investments. If you have no idea what that means, I sincerely encourage you to find out. This is a solid

part of adulting: knowing the fundamentals of how the market works and what it can and can't do with your money.

We're not talking about day-trading or becoming the next Warren Buffet. This is the simple mechanics of our economy and using those mechanics to make sure you have enough money to fuel your future. Read a book, find a good website, ask your chaplain (I'd love to talk about money with you). Better yet: track down Dave Ramsey's material, read it, then do it. His slogan, "Teaching people God's and Grandma's way of managing money."

I love that Solomon includes this. It's incredibly practical. Jesus taught a lot about money because it comes down to this: Money is a tool. Either you use it, or it uses you. If you don't know the fundamentals of banking, debt, compounding interest, and income, then you're going to get used.

There's nothing inherently spiritual about being poor. If you want to finish well, make money one less thing you'll have to worry about. Take Solomon's advice:

Proverbs 13:22 (NLT)

²²Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren, but the sinner's wealth passes to the godly.

Ecclesiastes 11:4-6 (NLT)

⁴Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest. ⁵Just as you cannot understand the path of the wind or the mystery of a tiny baby growing in its mother's womb, so you

cannot understand the activity of God, who does all things. ⁶ Plant your seed in the morning and keep busy all afternoon, for you don't know if profit will come from one activity or another—or maybe both.

Have a Bias Toward Action

How do you finish well? Do something. Seriously...make sure you're doing *something*. Be proactive and have a bias toward taking the next step.

I'm all for preparation, but sometimes that becomes another way to avoid action. As Solomon says, if you watch every cloud, you'll never harvest. One consistent theme throughout this book has been: you only have so much time to live. You don't know how much time you have, but in the grand scheme of things, you know it's not a lot of time.

Two things to help a bias toward action:

Know what you're about.

If someone asked you, "What are you about? What do you want out of life? Better yet: what are you good at? How has God gifted you, and what are you on earth to do with those gifts?"

What would you say? Do you have goals, a life mission statement, a manifesto? Are you able to answer that question? Do you know what you want people to say about you at your funeral?

For me, it all comes down to this: I want to teach and share the Gospel to the best of my ability with the gifts God

gave me. I want to love my wife with such intentionality that she'll never have to question it. I want to partner with my wife to raise kids who love Jesus in the good times and the bad.

If people say this about me at my funeral, then I've finished well. This is what I want from my time under the sun.

However, none of this will happen by accident. You don't just trip and fall into love and intimacy. If you want a good marriage, you must study your wife and come at her in a meaningful way. If you want to be good at your craft, skill, job? You must keep sharpening the saw: study, practice, do, practice, do.

If we want our kids to love Jesus more than us, then our kids must see us loving Jesus—not just hear me ramble on about it all the time. And, they need to know that I need God's grace and mercy too. So, when we're wrong, we confess, ask for forgiveness, and try to model repentance. This is nothing earth-shattering; it's just honesty about life and the need for Jesus to get through it.

Do the next right thing.

If you want to finish well with a bias toward action? Know what you need to do, and then do the very next right thing. It's easy to get bogged down in the details: "How am I going to lose 100 lbs.?" Put down the Twinkie. Then put it down again tomorrow. Repeat that until you die.

Do the next right thing. Don't think about the right thing. Do it. Don't write or study about the next right thing. Do it.

If not, then all your "want tos" are going to turn into "I wish I would have." You'll look up 30 years from now saying, "I wish I would have..." Don't be that person. Know what you're about, and then do the next right thing.

THE END OF THE MATTER

How does Solomon finish?

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:1 (NLT)

⁷Light is sweet; how pleasant to see a new day dawning. ⁸When people live to be very old, let them rejoice in every day of life. But let them also remember there will be many dark days. Everything still to come is a vapor. ⁹Young people, it's wonderful to be young! Enjoy every minute of it. Do everything you want to do; take it all in. But remember that you must give an account to God for everything you do. ¹⁰So refuse to worry, and keep your body healthy. But remember that youth, with a whole life before you, is a vapor. ¹¹Don't let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and say, "Life is not pleasant anymore."

To those who are old, Solomon says: enjoy life, because it's here today and gone tomorrow (rejoice in every day...). To those who are young, Solomon says: enjoy life, because it's here today and gone tomorrow (enjoy every minute...).

We eventually “grow old and say, ‘Life is not pleasant...’” So, regardless of the season of life you’re in, find joy in it. Decide you’ll have joy. You must choose that.

The opposite of joy— “many dark days”—you don’t need to look for that. It’s just going to happen. Joy—however—you must make that happen.

Ecclesiastes is a commentary on life. It’s an explanation of how the world *really* works: God has not called any of us to live an easy life. He never promised to take away all our problems. What He did promise is that we will have problems and He will still be God.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 (NLT)

¹³That’s the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone’s duty.

To paraphrase Oswald Chambers²: once you make the decision to fear God, you’ll realize there’s nothing else to fear. Until you decide to fear God, you’ll be afraid of everything else.

² (Chambers, 1935)



CHAPTER 11.

Worse Thank You Think

The preceding chapters have been my attempt to construct a 10-chapter worldview based on Solomon's 12-chapter Book of Ecclesiastes. As thorough as Solomon is, a friend and mentor noted one missing element (in my book, not Solomon's): The Gospel.¹

¹ I embarrassingly admit not catching the oversight myself, though God used my omission to (again) reinforce the importance of loving, God-honoring mentors in my life. Thank you, Barry Corder, for your time and effort in this project.

THE GOSPEL

“The Gospel” (a translation of the Greek word for “good news”) is shorthand for the Bible’s description of all that’s wrong with the world and what God’s doing about it.² It involves a necessary conversation about sin [the cause and effects of life’s messes], redemption [secured on our behalf via bleeding theology], and hope [symbolized by an Empty Tomb].³

In other words: our sinfulness separates us from God, creating a problem we can’t solve. Jesus’ death on the cross solves a problem He didn’t create, making a way for us to come back home.

LIFE IS MESSY

Life is messy. That may be the most self-evident statement ever made. Even with our best efforts and intentions, life gets messy. It’s hard. Unpredictable.

² Incidentally, for a more developed work on the topic, I highly recommend Greg Koukl’s “The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between” (Koukl, 2017)

³ This final chapter is an adaption of an article titled “Still in the Fray” from our site: www.fromthefray.com (Mesaeh, Still in the Fray, 2018)

Disappointing. Frustrating and unfair. Life is very, very not fair.⁴

Regardless of how you keep score, the math doesn't add up the way we think it should. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. Accidents and diseases don't care what color your skin is, whom you worship, or how much time you spend volunteering at nursing homes and animal shelters.

Without exception, every human must use words like cancer, depression, weep, sorrow, frustration, and why. Once would be too many times, but it often seems as if those words form the basis for our existence.

Some of our messes are self-inflicted. Others we inherit in the same way we're assigned an eye color and a shoe size. Wish you were a foot taller? Well, you probably didn't ask for an alcoholic parent or receding hairline either. Yet, life is messy. Often, life just hurts.

Both as cause and effect, the messes in our life are directly connected to our most profound mess: we are spiritually lost. The messiness of life makes us question our value and purpose. Because we question our value and purpose, we create messes everywhere we go.

⁴ It's worth stopping to point out: admitting the "unfairness" of life isn't a sin. As my son, William III, reminds me: the Book of Jeremiah is basically one long diatribe against God's perceived unfairness.

Consequently, our most savage insecurity is a spiritual one: Am I enough? Does any of this matter?

Theology Needs to Bleed

If you've ever tried to clean up a mess, you know how hard it is to stay clean while doing it. If it's an especially messy mess, everything you use gets ruined in the process.

The same is true of the messes in our personal life. You can't go through them unaffected. Whether you're wading into your own mess or the messes of those around you, don't expect to stay clean and dry while doing it. Some of the most meaningful words in the English language (compassion, empathy) describe coming along side to share in the experiences of others.

Picture the battlefield surgeon: after hours of intense surgery to save a soldier's life, he's drenched in sweat and covered in blood. Every ounce of who he is went into removing the mess of war from the patient's body. This is what we mean when we talk of "Bleeding Theology." There are many things about God we don't understand⁵. However, one thing seems to be clear: God is willing to bleed.

⁵ "God is under no obligation to make sense to me" is a phrase I first heard from Charles Wortman (he was drawing on the teachings of Neil deGrasse Tyson). Charles is now a USAF Chief Master Sergeant (the highest rank obtainable for our enlisted force). He was a mentor to me early in my career as a chaplain, and I continue to lean on his wisdom more than his humility will allow him to admit. (Wortman, 2015)

If—after acknowledging the messiness of life—you still believe God has your best interests at heart, then you might expect Him to be intimately involved in your rescue effort. To be invested and committed to wading into the pit after you. I believe He is. He proved it on the cross.

And I believe seeing God in the pit—experiencing Him in the mess—is more powerful and more healing for your soul than any emotional high delivered by self-help or prosperity preaching.

The response is as gritty as the mess. Bleeding theology is what The Gospel has to offer. That, and an Empty Tomb.

The Tomb is Empty

When Christians talk about an Empty Tomb, we are referring to the Tomb that held Jesus' dead body.

For 3 days. Until He got up and walked out of it.

The resurrection of Jesus proves a lot of things. To sort through all of them here would be to risk missing the most important thing: God wins.

God wins. If you're on God's side, you win too.

Take a moment to reorient yourself in the clarity only that statement can deliver. God wins. This is more powerful than, "You can do it" or "Just try harder." On the days when you have no "try" left in you, God still wins.

During the moments when you think you just can't, God does. And He wins.

Some of the scariest movies are the ones that can convince us—even if we're watching the movie for a second

or third time—that the bad guy might win. Maybe he'll kill the hero? Is he going to jump out of the darkness when no one is ready? If we think the end is in jeopardy, we sit in tension and fear.

Real life isn't like that.

God wins. There's no tension over who gets to walk away. God wins. The end isn't in jeopardy. God wins.

There's no promise your life won't sometimes feel like a scary movie. In fact, we're guaranteed it will⁶. At times, life will feel like a messy, bloody, scary movie full of darkness. But we already know how this story ends. God wins.

Worse than You Think

To fully appreciate what's been said so far, I have to offer one more piece of good news: you're worse than you think⁷.

That may not sound like good news, but hear me out.

God's decision to wade into the pit after you—bleeding on your behalf—was made with full knowledge of your insecurities, shortcomings, and propensity to make bad

⁶ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33, ESV)

⁷ This phrase was first shared with me by my (then) boss and (now) lifetime friend, Paul Joyner. (Joyner, 2015)

decisions.⁸ His rescue plan doesn't rely on your ability to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps."

Why not? Because you're worse than you think: unable to save yourself from the messy effects of living in this fallen world. To quote the great preacher Charles Spurgeon: "if any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him. For you are worse than he thinks you to be."

Reminding myself how little depends on my ability to get it together is one of the most comforting (and motivating) pieces of practical theology I'm ever apt to come across.

So, be at peace, my friend. God knows the things about you that make you cringe, and He's more for you than your own mother. Let that sink deep into your soul.

⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8, ESV)



CONCLUSION.

Now What?

What does one do with the kind of information found in Ecclesiastes? There are not many greeting cards or coffee cups displaying information like this. Most people just don't want to hear "Life is only hard until you die" while they are doing their best to live, laugh, love.

My prayer is that the message of Ecclesiastes will have the same effect on you that it (eventually) did on me. It won't make you the life of the party, nor will it give you an unwavering sunny disposition for the rest of your days. But, in my humble opinion, it can give you something much better: resilience.

Resilience is the propensity to keep getting back up. I pray the message of Ecclesiastes will make you the strong,

steady one in your social circles. I'm envisioning the man or woman who—amid chaos or tragedy—can be expected to not only “hold it together,” but will probably be the one carrying a few weary souls through to the other side.

However, it won't happen by sheer willpower or self-reliance. That's never been the Christian story. For us, Jesus remains “the anchor for the soul” (Hebrews 6.19).

Be encouraged. Stay humbly reliant on Jesus. And fight for joy.

For the Kingdom,

Bill Mesaeh, Jr.

Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ 2025



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

A Turtle on a Fence Post

I've heard it said: if you ever find a turtle on top a fence post, you know he didn't get there on his own. When it comes to writing this book, I am very much a turtle on a fence post.

My story begins—humanly speaking—with two amazingly hard-working, fiercely loving parents. Without their example, support, and relentless encouragement, I'd be nowhere near where I am today. To Bill Sr. and Lori D: thank you.

Editing and proofreading was—quite literally—a labor of love. I am indebted to those who laboriously poured over these pages simply because they love and support this turtle and his fence post. Thank you: Hannah, William III,

Kory Capps, Aleric Hebert, Barry Corder, Brian Raridon, and Justin Combs. You made this better.

If friendships make us who we are, I'm the product of two people. The first one was in my life longer than memory can recall; that is to say: from the beginning. Eric Whitesell is as much a brother as a friend (my kids know him only as 'Uncle Eric'). We've been around the world together, and one of us will put the other in the ground someday. Until then, I love you, B!

In 2015, I met a man who—without exaggeration—changed my life. His name is Kory Capps, and God developed our friendship into a tremendous source of goodness. A fellow chaplain, Kory helps me see the gospel more clearly and makes me serve the Kingdom more fiercely. In 2017 we started FromTheFray.com to help us refine and share our love for Christ's work. The site has grown in tandem with our friendship; I'm eager to see where the Lord takes both in the years ahead.

Whenever I officiate a wedding, I include this sentiment: "Before Eve, Adam had God above him and creation below him, but he lacked a partner to walk through life beside him. In response to this (which is recorded as the Bible's first negative statement: 'It is not good for man to be alone.'), God created Eve." In 2003, God introduced me to my Eve. Hannah is the strongest woman I know, and she loves me more than I deserve. I love you, Lucy. Team We.

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